PRINCIPALS’ EXPERIENCES WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis examines how principals of elementary schools in Massachusetts approach their leadership responsibilities while considering students with special needs. Elementary school principals interviewed provided insight regarding their understandings of special education and disabilities. The study found that as administrators, they recognize that they are accountable for 100% of the student population’s access to high-quality education. This concern for all students leaves principals overwhelmed at times because they also have to manage and lead their schools. The factors that assist a principal’s understanding of students with special needs include principal certification and preparation programs, personal experience with disabilities (either their own or those of another individual), teaching experience, leadership capabilities, and how much a principal knows about special education. The central issue is how individual principals view and describe their experiences with special education.

Key words: principals, elementary, special education, disabilities, MCAS.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Problem of Practice

The primary responsibilities of the elementary school principal are leadership, curricular guidance, management, and student preparation. Educating each student is a crucial concern. Wakeman, Browder, Flowers and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2006) wrote, “principals are expected to establish a climate that provides consistent and frequent opportunities for the growth and development of all students” (p.153). Consideration for and of students with special needs affects how principals approach their leadership responsibilities. Principals are expected to “critically confront and appreciate the ethical and legal dilemmas presented in the provision of special education services” (Oluwole, 2009 p. 12). Special education legislation ties principals’ performance to students’ performance, which creates an immediate need to understand the role of the principal and issues in special education (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, education law instituted a procedure, overseen by school committees and school superintendents that evaluate principal performance through clearly defined standards. Administrators are accountable for 100% of the student population’s access to high-quality education (see Appendix A).

Research Problem

Factors that assist a principal’s understanding of students with special needs include principal certification and preparation programs. In addition to their administrative training, principals’ personal experience with disabilities (either their own or those of another individual), and their teaching experience increase their knowledge about students with disabilities. Considering principals’ leadership capabilities and how much they know about special education
also contributes to their ability to address the demands of special education in the elementary school. How individual principals view and describe their experiences with special education is the central issue under study.

Justification for the Research Problem

As this study’s research was analyzed, the disconnect between what principals experience in their position as the head of the school and the students they affect was evident. There is compartmentalization in many studies of principals; other research often looks at only one facet of principals’ responsibilities. Considering the breadth of principals’ knowledge of and experiences with students with special needs provides a bigger picture, however. Earlier studies related to school leaders and special education include studies of principals’ attitudes (Praisner, 2003), their understanding of special education matters (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers and Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006), inclusion of students with disabilities (Salisbury and McGregor, 2002) and the establishment of schools led by principals who are prepared to address the needs of all students (Dipaola, Walther-Thomas, 2003; Dipaola, Tschannen-Moran, Walther-Thomas, 2004).

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Principals’ accounts, their “stories” of their experiences with special education are not evident in existing research (Pugach, 2001, p.439). Praisner (2003) explored the preparation elementary school principals received, the attitudes that school administrators possessed regarding inclusion, and the connection between inclusion and those attitudes. In her study, Praisner found:

there has been some research and discussion regarding the importance of principals’ attitudes toward inclusion, but there is very little that identifies the present state of those attitudes. There is even less research that attempts to identify the influences that develop
attitudes toward inclusion or determine the impact principals’ attitudes have on placement perceptions. (p.136)

There is also little evidence of the story that principals tell about special education (Pugach, 2001, p.439). Pugach’s interest was primarily in the stories that individuals with disabilities tell for qualitative research purposes to explore the needs of “those who have been oppressed or disenfranchised in schools” (Pugach, 2001, p.443). In an elementary school, the principal possesses another integral piece of the story. In revealing how principals view special education in their schools, their experiences can assist in “creating a much more complete understanding of the educational experiences of students and their families who have been marginalized within the educational system” (Pugach, 2001, p.443).

Significance of the Problem

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) provide school superintendents with guidelines for proficiency of performance for school administrators. Principals in Massachusetts must be proficient in four standards: Instructional Leadership, Management and Operations, Family and Community Engagement, and Professional Culture. There are 33 indicators for the four standards and the phrase “all students” repeats in the descriptor for each one (DESE, 2011). The evaluation system that the DESE accepts is in effect in Massachusetts elementary schools. Familiarity with one school district is provided to illustrate this point and clarify the issue’s significance. In the Quabbin Regional School District, five elementary schools implement the DESE supported evaluation system. Ruggles Lane School is one of the five schools and its statistics are referenced here to provide context.

At Ruggles Lane School, 20.3% of students are identified as having special needs (see Figure 1)(Profiles, DESE, 2013). When faced with the task of proficiently addressing the needs
for 100% of students, of whom more than 20% have special needs, the school principal’s experience is unavoidably affected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>% of School</th>
<th>% of District</th>
<th>% of State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Language not English</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learner</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-income</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students With Disabilities</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Lunch</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Needs</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1
2012-2013 Selected Population
Ruggles Lane School
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Enrollment of selected populations of students for the 2012-2013 school year. Comparisons made in percentages to the District and State averages. Students with disabilities numbers 20.3% of the total school population. Numbers are based on data submitted to the DESE as of October 1 of the 2012-2013 school year. Adapted from DESE Public School District home page.

At the local level, the focus of the school principal is on the delivery of appropriate educational services for students. At the state level, principals’ evaluation has transitioned to a system that reflects four standards, all of which involve “all students.” At the federal level, the reauthorization of the Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004) outlines the need for the appropriate training of school principals in addressing Individual Education Program (IEP) needs, technology integration for students with disabilities, and training for teachers and principals who work with these identified students (IDEA, 2004). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 states that “high-quality professional development” must be provided to principals for them to “enable all children in the school to meet the State’s academic achievement standards” (NCLB, 2002, § D.4).
At the global level, the common core standards aim to prepare students to function as important players in communities and help America prosper. Common core standards have been adopted by 46 states (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012) and the Council of Chief State Officers supports them. The National Governors Association, which helped bring the common core to fruition, includes in its mission statement, “With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012, p.1), highlighting the importance of preparing all students.

The educational starting point for students in Barre, Massachusetts is Ruggles Lane School, a member of the Quabbin Regional School District (QRSD). The Mission Statement for QRSD reads:

The Quabbin Regional School District believes all students have the opportunity to achieve personal excellence in a safe and accepting environment. Our mission is to prepare students to become self-sufficient, lifelong learners who are resourceful and responsible citizens in a global society (Quabbin Regional School District Strategic Plan, 2012).

A principal must prepare all students to live as members of a global community. The significance of what school leaders put into place for students with disabilities reverberates from the small town to the world of the future. Therefore, the principals’ experiences with special education are important to understand and pursue.

The audiences who benefit from this study are principals, those who oversee principal preparation programs, students, and their families. The understanding of principals’ experiences related to the level of preparation they have received, their personal experiences with special
education, and the overall interpretation of their story will inform current and future principals in their quest to ensure achievement for all students enrolled in their schools.

Positionality Statement

In developing the understanding of principals and their experiences with special education, acknowledgement of the researcher’s perspectives must be considered. Foremost, personal involvement with my child who is autistic has shaped my life. It led directly to a Bachelor of Science in Education, a Master of Education in Special Education, an administrative preparation program, and the pursuit of doctoral studies in educational leadership.

Working as a team member with schools in the roles of a parent, a teacher, and currently as a school principal provides personal experience that serves as background knowledge. Direct observation as a participant in my son’s education demonstrated great variability in school principals’ understandings of students with special needs. My experience as a parent provided more insight into the special education process, and influenced my understanding of special education as a teacher, and subsequently as a principal. This is an area of potential bias in this research because there is a familiar level of awareness for special education students and their relatives.

Additionally, I believe that principals must address the needs of every student in the school and do so with a sense of purpose. Fullan (2003) wrote, “principals with moral purpose should not wait for the system to get its act together but should be pushing in this direction” (p.48). Principals are the leaders in their school buildings; they are “the glue that binds together school-wide goals, teacher needs, and student learning” (Bays and Crockett, 2007 p. 144). In addition, I hold the perspective that a moral purpose is one that involves the whole school, and if
principals are not prepared to address the particular needs of students with disabilities adequately, they are at risk of not preparing a significant portion of their students.

**Research Questions**

Public school principals approach selected populations as identified by their specific characteristics and the needs of each population. This research seeks to identify whether planning for a group that ranges from 15% to 20% of the total school population is significant for principals, and will look at how principals view the needs of one fifth of the children under their care (DESE, 2003).

This investigation will survey principals regarding their ability to meet the needs of students with special needs attending their schools. It seeks to identify the demographic information, certification preparedness, philosophical perspectives, and views of students with special needs that principals gain over time. Another factor under consideration is the amount of time that principals spend managing other aspects of special education, including IEP meetings, behavioral incidents, competency of instructional specialties, delivery of services, and the perception of staff members. The two main questions are:

1. **What factors contribute to principals’ proficiencies with special education?**
   - What are the demographic contributors of the principals participating (certifications, philosophy of education, view of special education over their time as a principal, percentage of students in their school with identified disabilities, MCAS scores of subgroups)?

2. **How do principals view their experiences with special education?**
   - Does the time spent on special education issues shape their experiences (time at IEP meetings, attending Student Support Teams [SSTs],
communication with parents, behavioral incidents, competency of special education staff)?

**Theoretical Framework**

Disability theory, leadership theory, and critical theory support asking these questions and are the frameworks used to organize the investigations and analysis of the problem. They frame the discussion for the importance of care for this school subgroup. They also delineate the qualities of effective leaders that may help when reviewing principals’ responses regarding their proficiencies and experiences.

Disability theory provides understanding of the potential “marginalization” of students (Devlin and Pothier, 2005, p.1). Bronner, (2011) wrote, “critical theory was always concerned not merely with how things were but how they might be and should be” (pp.1-2). Seibers, (2008) wrote, “disability identity and its defining experiences will transform critical and cultural theory yet again” (p.3).

Leadership theory for this process will focus on the leader at the “individual and group level” (Nohria, 2010, p. 76), which will spotlight “the important capabilities for successful leadership in organizations and at the group level,” including both “diagnostic abilities and behavioral flexibility” (pp. 76-77). All three theories apply to this research. Understanding of these theoretical frameworks informs how the principal as the leader of the school establishes an effective school experience for students with special needs.

Disability theory in Ryndak, Jackson, and Billingsley’s (2000) study of inclusion focused on the definition of inclusion. Ryndak et al. (2000) found variability dependent upon student placement, program structure, and the “role” a student plays (p.103). The theoretical framework of disability theory points to the general difficulties and harmful approaches that play a direct
role in the inclusion of students with special needs. Of concern for schoolchildren are “access and participation, exclusion and inclusion … marginalization and belonging, [and] social recognition” (Devlin and Pothier, 2005 p.2). The critical theorists “illuminate the hidden sources of repression and “clarify the conditions of oppression” ” (Bronner, 2011, p. 100) (p. 8). Students with disabilities qualify for consideration of critical theory because they represent a specific segment of the school population. Seiler (2012) wrote that it is “necessary to understand the lived experience of real people in context [in] order to understand the ways in which various social groups are oppressed” (p.1). The intention is “to make judgments for the purpose of bringing about positive change” (Seiler, 2012 p.1).

Leadership theory involves the school principal directly. Leadership theorists identify the qualities that make an effective principal as charisma, character, a sense of responsibility, and the follow-through and accomplishment of a common task (Fullan, 2008). Kouzas and Posner (2008) identify those characteristics differently; their top seven characteristics are honesty, forward-thinking, competence, the ability to inspire, intelligence, fair-mindedness, and broad-mindedness (2008). School principals must convey the mission and vision of the school to accomplish specific organizational goals for all students. According to Praisner (2003), leadership theory plays a particular part in the changing role of the principal as a manager and instructional leader of the school who is entrusted with the education of all students.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Elementary School Principals

Elementary school principals are in a position to safeguard the education of students with disabilities. They assist in planning for students with special education needs, which must be done in tandem with improving the overall academic achievement of the school. Principals’ continued employment is based on the success of all students. The importance of understanding how principals view special education is critical because the principal “sets the tone” and attitude in the school for all members of the school, including students, teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff, parents, and the community (Horrocks, 2008, p.1472). Listening to the experiences of elementary school principals and recording their stories will reveal how they view special education in their schools.

The key areas of focus are principals and school leadership, special education, and the specific language associated with the area of special education. The study also considers factors that contribute to how a principal approaches running the school, and the type of leadership style with which they approach the position. Special education is a separate entity that involves mandates, procedural guidelines, and an essential understanding of disabilities. Studying vocabulary particular to special education provides an understanding of the interpretations of areas specific to special education such as inclusion, IEPs, disabilities, and placement.

Elementary school principals are the leaders in the school. Research shows that the school principal is a key to student achievement (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins, and Harris, 2006; Fullan, 2008; Praisner, 2003; Frost, and Kersten, 2011; Salisbury and McGregor, 2002; Dipaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003; DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas,
2004; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). The importance of principals and the “role” they play is “pivotal” (Fullan, 2008, p.5) (DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003 p.6). The principal oversees all functions of the school operation, including curriculum, facilities, family involvement, and practitioner relationships. These “education leaders must not only manage school finances, keep buses running on time, and make hiring decisions, but they must also be instructional leaders, data analysts, community relations officers, and change agents” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 3). In the past, “principals served as building managers and student disciplinarians” (DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003, p.7). Today, they “play a key role in school improvement and improving student outcomes” (Waldron, McLesky, and Redd, 2011, p. 51). A school’s path is set by the principal, and “it is the principal who sets the tone for the entire school community” (Horrocks, 2008, p. 1472).

The principal is qualified to lead the school by becoming certified. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the DESE supervises principal preparation, and there several routes to attain certification. The authorization process of principals in Massachusetts requires them to complete an “apprenticeship” an “approved post-baccalaureate program” with an internship, or a “panel-review” (DESE, 603 CMR 7.15 (3)). Of note is the lack of specification regarding content areas specific to perform effectively in the role. This certification allows an individual to take the position of principal in Massachusetts. Not all principals obtain the exact same training, nor do they start with the same background, so the instruction they receive in the area of special education must vary depending upon which path they choose. Speaking with principals regarding their route to certification and the apply their understandings of special education to their jobs

1
may assist in future training of principals, possibly helping to prepare them to address the needs of all students more effectively.

**Problem Statement**

Elementary school principals and their stories as they relate to special education, as well as their implementation of schooling for students with disabilities are at issue. Queries about the experiences of elementary school principals in regards to special education include the level of preparedness they feel, and the demands that special education regulations place on them. Through speaking with principals, discovering how they received their certifications, and the coursework required in the area of special education, it is possible to gauge their perceived level of preparedness.

Principals’ prior teaching proficiency and personal connections to individuals with disabilities may also affect their experiences as the building leader in charge of special education. How principals view special education involves the complex responsibility of mandated testing that must demonstrate growth for all students. Principal evaluations also hinge on test results. The responsibility for children with disabilities rests in the hands of a school leader who is prepared to provide the necessary school experience for the neediest students.

**Organization**

This study is organized in four sections: principals and leadership, special education and disabilities, and the language of special education, followed by what the research says about principals and special education.

The elementary school principal serves as the leader for the building. The path that allows an individual to obtain a position as an elementary school principal and the leadership capabilities they bring to a school are linked to the performance of all the students in the school.
Special education policies and procedures, as well as the types of disabilities present in elementary schools are reviewed as they pertain to the daily environment and operations of the public elementary school. Language associated with special education is studied because there is potential variation in the interpretation of special education initiatives and their implementation. What is known about principals and their involvement with special education is presented last.

**Principals**

The elementary school principal is considered a leader and manager (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2004; DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003; Fullan, 2003; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins, and Harris, 2006). They are essentially “the battlefield commanders” who safeguard the school so all students receive instruction in a place where the “climate provides consistent and frequent opportunities for growth” (Hess and Kelley, 2006, p.2) (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers and Delzell, 2006, p. 153). Because the principal is a manager as well as leader, their role has become more complex. They must be “more than operational managers;” they must “be instructional leaders as well” (Wakeman et al., 2006, p.153).

As the “instructional leader” in the elementary school, principals need to provide “strong, directive leadership focused on curriculum and instruction” (Wahlstrom and Louis, p. 459) (Hallinger, 2003, p.229). “The domain of the principal leading knowledgeably” is essentially learning “what needs to be known -- about the child, about teaching and learning, and about the use of data as a strategy for both improvement and accountability” (Fullan, 2008, p.23). Serving as a building principal is a “major responsibility” (Robson, 1981 p.378).

There is “research [that] supports the increasing pressure on principals to deliver better instruction” for students (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008, p. 459). With the increased responsibility and knowledge that principals must possess and use to lead and manage the school, the
principalship is “incredibly more complex and substantially different from what it was even a short time ago” (Fullan, 2008, p. 5). Principals must have “a strong sense of purpose” because everything “that takes place” at their schools is their “major responsibility” (Fullan, 2008, p. 59) (Robson, 1981, p.378).

**Leadership**

The Educational Leadership Policy Standards written and distributed by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) say, “Education leadership is more important than ever” (ISLLC, 2008, p.1). Research compiled by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) found that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (p. 6). This finding is echoed in literature distributed to principals, in the ISLLC standards report, and in literature about leadership (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins, and Harris, 2006, Fullan, 2008).

In researching the definition of leadership, there are variations in the descriptions. The constants are a process of influence that school leaders employ (Bush and Glover, 2003; Northouse, 2010). School leaders also lead from a place that is “grounded in firm personal and professional values” (Bush and Glover, 2003, p. 4). It is also about “character … personal values, self-awareness and emotional and moral capability” (Bush and Glover, 2003, p. 5). Beare, Caldwell, and Millikan (1989) also found that school leaders must have a “vision” and “common goals” (Northouse, 2010, p. 161). Leaders also must “provide direction” (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 20).

School leaders must “manage,” which involves “implementation of school policies and the efficient and effective maintenance of the school’s current activities” (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins, and Harris, 2006) (Bush and Glover, 2003, p. 10). Principals also must
manage “seven primary dimensions:” “educational results/achievements, personnel, technology, external relationships, norms and values, classroom instruction, and school culture” (Hess and Kelley, 2006, p.5). Northouse qualifies the aspect of managing as one that “overlaps” when one is in the leadership position (2010, p.253).

The type of leadership a school principal employs is also a factor. The research completed by Bush and Glover (2003) describe the following leadership models: “instructional leadership” (p. 11), “transformational leadership” (p. 12), “moral leadership” (p. 15), “participative leadership” (p. 17), “managerial leadership” (p. 19), “post-modern leadership” (p. 20), “interpersonal leadership” (p. 21), and “contingent leadership” (p. 21). School leadership is “complex and diverse” (Bush and Glover, 2003, p. 31).

Research on leadership also focuses on types of leaders and the “traits” they possess (Northouse, 2010, p. 533). This is used when looking specifically on the attributes of the leader. The following are “consistently identified” as leadership traits: “intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability” (Northouse, 2010, p. 539). There are multitudes of other ways to identify leadership, such as through the Three-Skill Approach (technical, human, and conceptual skills), the Style Approach (what “leaders do rather than who leaders are” p. 1104), and the Situational Approach (Northouse, 2010). The list grows depending on the interest of the researcher.

The interest in leadership in schools, the type of leadership and the qualities that leaders possess is widely documented and researched (Hallinger, 2003, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins, and Harris, 2006, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty, 2003). At the core of this interest is the desire to improve student achievement (Waters et al., 2003 Leithwood et al., 2004). “Good
leadership is a necessary but insufficient condition for successful schooling” (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 144).

Many studies have looked at leadership of all students, however none “of these studies had addressed the issue of educating students with disabilities” (Boscardin, 2009, p. 69).

Special Education

Understanding how special education has transformed the educational landscape requires consideration of the progression of directives that dictate procedures for students with disabilities (Downing and Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Gaddy, McNulty, and Waters, 2002; Idol, 2006; Smith and Leonard, 2005). The legislation delineating provisions for students with special needs begins with the Education for All Handicapped Act (EHA), Public Law 94-142, which was enacted in 1975. The goal of the EHA was to provide “a free appropriate public education to each child with a disability” (United States Office of Special Education, 2010). In the 1990s, the EHA went through several changes, including a name change in 1997 to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). There were additions that addressed the need for future designs when moving from the school to adulthood. In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) with a goal to “close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (NCLB, 2001, 107-110, § 115, Stat. 1425). This law was updated again with the reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004 as a response to the changes in the EHA. It included higher expectations for students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004, p.3).

These legislative mandates set the tone for special education. The “free, appropriate public education for children with disabilities” and the provision for an IEP as well as the “requirement that schools actively involve parents in planning,” and that “students with disabilities be placed in the least restrictive environment” must be followed in the public school
(Gaddy, McNulty, and Waters, 2002, p. 2). At the building level of the public school, there are three considerations: “funding,” “accountability,” and “professional development” (Gaddy et al., 2002, p. 3). Research shows that these mandates have “enhanced the principal’s accountability” and that “special education has become a major concern for school leaders” (Bays and Crockett, 2007, p. 143).

These mandates pertain to students who have an identified disability. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, there are ten explicit disabilities outlined according to Massachusetts General Law (603 CMR 28.00). They are autism, developmental delay, intellectual impairment, sensory impairment (hearing, vision, or deaf/blind), neurological impairment, emotional impairment, communication impairment, physical impairment, health impairment, or specific learning disability. The elementary school principal does not determine the disability of a student, but they are a member of the school-based team.

There is a process for identification of students with disabilities. Massachusetts public schools use the guide developed, published, and distributed by the DESE to make certain that students receive every opportunity to succeed (MDOE, 2001). All members of the school-based team take part in “eligibility determination” the subsequent “IEP development,” and “placement” of the student (MDOE, 2001, p.5). An Annual Review is held for all students, and in Massachusetts public schools, students receive a review every three years called the Reevaluation. Both the Annual Review and the three-year reevaluation require development of a new IEP. This IEP contains important information; it “directs the educational needs, goals and objectives, placement, evaluation criteria, present levels of educational performance, and duration of programing modifications” (Fish, 2010, p.1). Essentially, it is the “blueprint for services to be provided” (Fish, 2010, p.1).
There are instances in which meetings concerning students with disabilities are not for an Annual Review or a Reevaluation. Any member of the team can reconvene the group to discuss a concern that arises in the education of the student. There are also meetings that individual schools determine are necessary for the continuation of tracking student progress. These meetings are referred to differently from school to school. Local schools in Massachusetts call them Student Support Meetings, Child Studies, or Staffing Meetings. Bays and Crockett (2007) also identified seven other areas where principals are involved in the special education needs of students: “parent conferences,” “discussions with teachers and guidance counselors,” “meetings with agency personnel,” “phone calls to directors of special education,” “faculty meetings,” “teacher observations,” and “interactions with individual students” (p. 148). Knowledge of special education mandates, disabilities, and the procedures developed at the elementary-school level is essential. The United States Department of Education’s report in 2010 “celebrating” the accomplishments of EHA, IDEA, and NCLB looks toward improvements in the educational opportunities that are provided for students with disabilities. It also highlights the importance of these mandates: “Our nation’s ability to compete successfully in the global community depends on the meaningful inclusion of all citizens in our educational system, including students with disabilities” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p.18).

The Language of Special Education

Over time, special education has developed its own frequently used terminology. For the purposes of this research, some key expressions were defined in terms of how they affect principals and their experiences with special education (Department of Education [DOE], 2001). The terms disability, team, mainstreaming, and inclusion are discussed in this study.

Disability as defined in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 is:
… with respect to an individual -- (A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual; (B) a record of such an impairment; or (C) being regarded as having such an impairment. (U.S. Code [law character] 12102)

In Massachusetts, the following are considered “educational disabilities:” autism, intellectual, emotional, physical, health, developmental delay, neurological, communication, specific learning, sensory: hearing, vision, deaf-blind (DOE, 2001).

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts DESE provides no clear definition of the term team. What is clear is that the team works as together to help students receive the help they require. Members of the team include the principal, parents, regular education staff, special education staff, and other service providers (e.g. the team chairperson, clinical coordinator, and speech therapist) (DOE, 2001). The approach the team takes is to work together to fulfill the requirements of the IEP process, such as eligibility determination, IEP development, and placement (DOE, 2001).

The IDEA did not use the terminology mainstreaming. According to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), mainstreaming “implies that the child will be educated when appropriate, but not necessarily exclusively in general education” (ERIC, 2002, p.3). The word mainstreaming is not one currently in use, and is out of date. The preferred terminology to refer to students being included in the classroom while receiving special education services is inclusion (Downing and Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Doyle, 2003; Salisbury and McGregor, 2002; Smith and Leonard, 2005).

There are different understandings of the term inclusion. Research conducted by Ryndak, Jackson, and Billingsley (2000) provides five key areas that serve to define inclusion in
Massachusetts public schools. These five areas are also echoed by other researchers, although there are differing opinions on inclusive schools and inclusive practices (Idol, 2006; Salisbury, and McGregor, 2002; Doyle, 2003). Inclusion is when “placement [occurs] in [the] natural typical setting, all students are together for instruction and learning, supports and modifications [are provided] within general education [setting] to meet appropriate learner outcomes, belongingness, equal membership, acceptance and being valued [are norms], collaborative integrated services by education teams [is provided] (Ryndak, et al. 2000, p. 108).

Principal and Special Education

Research conducted more than 30 years ago looked at the knowledge that principals possessed regarding what was previously referred to as “handicapped children” (Cline, 1981, 9.172). In 1981 he wrote, “Of major importance is the lack of knowledge on the part of principals concerning handicapped students” (Cline, p.174). Cline also wrote that “the principal is, indeed the school’s gatekeeper,” and that “mainstreaming has a poorer chance of success if the principal is not knowledgeable concerning the educational needs of the children to be managed” (Cline, 1981, p.174).

Current practices demonstrate that the principal is in a position to be a member of the team, evaluate teacher and student performance, and set the school culture by modeling for staff, parents, and students (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006; Lazaridou, 2009; Bays and Crockett, 2007). To ensure that students receive proper instruction, Administrators must be vigilant about maintaining quality and doggedly monitor academic outcomes and classroom practices to ensure that programs designed for students with special leaning needs do not become “dumping grounds” that further marginalize the students they were designed to help. (Boykin and Noguera, 2011, p. 187)
To accomplish this task, principals must have “fundamental knowledge of special education as well as knowledge of current issues in special education” (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, Ahlgrimm-Delzell, 2006, p. 154).

Education mandates such as NCLB place increased emphasis on testing and academic progress of all students. School principals “will be challenged to join together in solving the problems of practice inherent in diverse, complex, high-stakes educational environment” (Boscardin, McCarthy, and Delgado, 2009, p. 68). The IDEA mandated participation of all students in yearly testing (IDEA, 1997), but some principals view the results of yearly assessments and determination of progress that demonstrate growth and achievement for all students as “unreasonable” (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers and Ahlgrimm-Delzell, 2006, p. 154). This presents a significant challenge to the school principal who must supervise and direct staff.

The principal leads the teaching staff and determines what teachers need in terms of “guidance and support,” and he or she sets expectations for students with disabilities (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers and Ahlgrimm-Delzell, 2006, p. 154). School principals “need a deep understanding of students with disabilities and how to effectively support these students” to truly lead the school and staff (Gaddy, McNulty, and Waters, 2002, p. 7). More than 30 years ago, this was also true: “knowledge of the nature and needs of handicapped youngsters is mandatory for intelligent decision-making by principals” (Cline, 1981, p. 172).

It is important to consider principals’ experiences with special education because they are the models for staff: “Principals need to demonstrate appropriate attitudes and behaviors regarding inclusion for the faculty as the instructional leaders of the school” (Horrocks, White, and Roberts, 2008, p.1464). Teachers provide a model for students in the attitudes they present in the classroom:
The attitudes and behaviors of educational professionals toward the integration of disabled children into regular education programs are critical since non-disabled students model the attitudes and behaviors of adults … Despite this key role of principals in initiating and maintaining the support for this change, only a few empirical studies have been reported on principals’ views regarding inclusion. (Horrocks et al., 2008, p. 1464)

In other studies that have looked at principals’ views, some “showed they supported the benefits of inclusion, while others revealed a tendency for low expectations for success” (Horrocks et al., 2008, p.1464).

Preparation for dealing appropriately with special education and students with disabilities is an area of weakness, and principals are “ill-prepared” to manage all aspects of this area (Praisner, 2003, p. 142) (Lazaridou, 2009). The reverse is also accurate; Dipaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) wrote that members of educational leadership “who clearly understand the needs of students with disabilities, IDEA, and the instructional challenges that educators who work with students with disabilities face are better prepared to provide appropriate support” (p.9). Consideration of “principal leadership and special education,” and more specifically the experiences of principals with special education have “not received much attention until recently” (Praisner, 2003) (Dipaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 6).
Chapter Three

Research Design

Methodology

In this qualitative study, the inspection of on-the-job and personal experiences that principals have had led to informing the identification of both positive and negative school situations involving students with special needs in the public school setting. As Glesne (2006) wrote, “Learning to listen well to others’ stories and to interpret and retell the accounts is part of the qualitative researcher’s trade” (p.1). The use of qualitative research when addressing special education issues will highlight the story that each principal tells. In the use of what Pugach calls “disciplined” stories, this study yields “an extensive description of context, of people’s perceptions of the phenomenon under consideration” (Pugach, 2001, p. 440). The attempt was to “gain access to the multiple perspectives of the participants” (Glesne, 2006, p.5). Individual interviews with elementary school principals were conducted and interview questions were open-ended. Journal notes were important to recording impressions of each interviewee, as well as the nuances observed. Interviews were transcribed following each session. All correspondence was collected.

Research Questions

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What factors contribute to principals’ proficiencies with special education?
   - What are the demographic contributors of the principals participating (certifications, philosophy of education, view of special education over their time as a principal, percentage of students in their school with identified disabilities, MCAS scores of subgroups)?
2. How do principals view their experiences with special education?
   - Does the time spent on special education issues shape their experiences (time at IEP meetings, attending Student Support Teams, communication with parents, behavioral incidents, competency of special education staff)?

The researcher also asked specifically about demographic data. This included the designation assigned by the DESE of the school based on its MCAS scores, the types of disabilities encountered at the school, and the population of the school. These are relevant to the commitment of resources at the school, including personnel and the delivery of special education services. The educational background of principals, as well as their experience levels were analyzed and coded for a complete picture of the principals, as well as the relevant factors that lead to positive or negative experiences with special education.

*Research*

The most compelling instrument used in similar previous research was the Principals and Inclusion Survey (PIS). This survey was used in studies completed by Ryndak, Jackson, and Billingsley (2000), Praisner (2003), and Ramirez (2006). It was relevant because it identified demographic information about, as well as the training and experience level of principals. An expanded PIS was developed for Praisner’s (2003) study, which included additional sections that determined principal “attitudes” and “beliefs” (p. 136). This modification of the survey allowed for the identification of additional factors that directly affect students with special needs. Questions similar to those found on the PIS were asked in this study. Principals’ responses were representative of a small sample. They reflected analogous information with more of an emphasis on the principals’ personal experience with special education.
Qualitative studies were reviewed to assist in the study. Previous studies conducted by Oluwole (2009), Idol (2006), Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007), Smith and Leonard (2005), and Bays and Crockett (2007), all performed interviews in their research. Interviews involved principals, teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, and special education directors.

The analysis of principals’ responses revealed data that relates more to problem of practice under investigation. Praisner (2003) wrote, “a principal’s leadership is seen as the key factor to success” (p. 135). Smith and Leonard (2005) report that “facilitative principal leadership is considered foundational to successful inclusive programs” (p. 269). This research project adds to the research on principals’ experiences with special education.

The importance of this study is multi-dimensional; it tells the story of four individual principals and identifies gaps in their understanding of special education. The field of educational leadership can benefit from understanding how principals describe their experiences. The aim is to identify, understand, and inform the principal’s role, and possibly affect the “transformation” of their perceptions where special education students are concerned.

Participants

The sampling of principals was determined with the use of data provided by the Massachusetts DESE. The DESE profiles all public schools, and the profiles include contact information. That information, such as the principal’s name, the address of the school, map and directory were used to develop the sample. Factors included in the participation process were public, elementary school principals located in central Massachusetts, and the elimination of personal friends who were principals. Four individuals were chosen for a representative sample. All were principals in central Massachusetts in elementary schools serving grades kindergarten through at least grade four, up to grade eight. The principals represented rural and urban settings,
as well as varying years in the position. This small sample reflects only the views expressed, and may not be generalizable to all principals’ experiences in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Using the contact information found on the DESE website, the researcher emailed thirty-seven principals in central Massachusetts and asked for participants willing to be interviewed. Respondents were contacted by email, followed by phone conversations. The researcher used a script with each principal, and respondents were provided with notice of protection as well as all required forms as outlined in the Institutional Review Board approval. These forms were mailed to subjects. No incentives were provided for participants. All principals interviewed agreed to spend at least one hour with the researcher to answer questions.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted at the school where each principal was employed. The “natural setting” where these administrators were comfortable allowed them to “behave and act within their context,” which assisted in the interview process (Creswell, 2009, p.175). The researcher used the same interview protocol for each interviewee. The interview process took approximately one hour to complete. All interviews were taped and transcribed. Then, responses were analyzed and themes were correlated. All of this was completed solely by the researcher, and every attempt was made to transcribe interviews immediately following the session.

Notes taken at interview sites were collected to provide context and to assist in telling the stories of each interviewee. Cresswell recommended audiotaping, videotaping, and taking notes, and for these interviews the use of audiotaping and note taking were implemented (2009, p.183).

Data storage

Data was stored in the researcher’s home on a computer. A backup system using a removable zip drive was also used for storage. Ensuring the confidentiality of each participant
was the responsibility of the researcher. All researcher names and information are referred to by a pseudonym in this study. Access to data was limited to the researcher and the researcher’s advisor in case there was a specific question under discussion during the review of this study. The researcher used methods described in Creswell’s *Research Design* (2009), including an “observational protocol,” “descriptive notes,” “reflective notes,” and “demographic information” (2009, p. 182).

**Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

In this research, interviews that assessed principal’s experiences with special education assisted in telling the individual stories of each of the four principals. Cresswell identified several advantages of using interviews in a qualitative study because the “participants can provide historical information” and the interviewer/researcher had “control over the line of questioning” (2009, p.179). The researcher’s “eyes and ears are the tools” that were used “to make sense of what is going on,” therefore the impressions and notes the researcher used are important (Maxwell, 2005, p.79). It was “particularly important in an interview study” to make note of “whatever informal data” was available (Maxwell, p.79).

Using the audiotaped interview responses, the researcher retyped all recorded responses word-for-word on the computer using a word processing program. Notes gathered at each interview site were also transcribed and added to the completed interview responses in the same manner. This research study sought to uncover the stories of each principal and his or her experiences with students who have disabilities. In the analysis of their responses, the researcher sought to “make connections among the stories” (Glesne, 2006, p. 152). Identifying “themes and patterns” in the respondents’ answers provided data about emergent stories to code. Glesne described methods to approach this process: identification of “major codes,” “concepts,” and
“central ideas,” which helped in developing a “code book” (p. 153). This assisted the researcher in keeping responses in context.

The researcher attempted to do exactly what Glesne advised: “Think with your data, reflecting upon what you have learned, making new connections and gaining new insights” (p. 154).

Glesne (2006) and Creswell (2007) recommended triangulating data and reflecting “upon your own subjectivity and how you will use and monitor it in your research” (Glesne, p. 37). The experience of the researcher as a former special education teacher combined with seven years as a school administrator provided a solid understanding of the role and responsibility of school principals. The interest and connection to individuals with special needs is both personal and professional, and potentially affected the researcher’s interpretation of interviewee responses. If a response was antithetical to a belief held by the researcher, it could have been questioned or not given the attention that a mutually held opinion would. To minimize this possibility, the researcher attended to and followed the interview protocol exactly with each participant. Writing impressions was a key to understanding and clarifying the experiences of each principal.

None of the participants’ views regarding special education were known to the researcher. Their opinions and point of view were not divulged until they were participating in the interview. It was noted in research findings if a bias was revealed during the interviews. The researcher also needed to look at “underlying moral assumptions” when interpreting interview responses and truly reflect what the individual voiced in the research findings (Cresswell, 2007, p. 205).

Principals appeared to divulge their feelings about special education and disabilities fully and without fear that the researcher had judged them as intolerant, or privately labeled them an
ableist or someone with prejudice against individuals with disabilities. They asked questions of
the interviewer when they needed a question repeated or if they wanted clarification, and
example of which is when Colleen asked, “Do you want to know about my most memorable
special education student or just my most memorable?”

Glesne proposed the use of persistent observation for the researcher to employ when
gauging the trustworthiness of the individual responses in the interview, which helped support
the claim that interviewees answered honestly (p. 37). The researcher observed and interviewed
participants in four elementary schools, which provided commonalities in the findings and
allowed for triangulation of data. The researcher spoke with principals and experienced them
divulging their histories with special education and the principalship in a way that was
confidential, valid, and meaningful.

Following the transcription of all four interviews, the researcher looked for emerging
themes in the interviewees’ responses. Questions during the interviews supported a chronological
order, which lent itself to a sequence structure. This structure represented the account of each
principal’s experience, and upon review, easily read as individual stories. With the use of coding
software, an analysis of the most frequently used words was also conducted and analyzed. This
assisted in the development of the emerging themes and helped identify overlapping experiences
of the four principals.

The researcher gathered the responses to interview questions and studied these clusters.
Analysis of the oral responses allowed the researcher to hear each principal’s thoughts in relation
to specific questions and topics. The threads of commonality presented logic to their thinking for
the researcher to better comprehend their responses and their overall story. The voices of each
interviewee came through in this process, partly because of their levels of experience as administrators and their personalities.
Chapter Four

Report of Research Findings

Introduction

This is the account of four elementary school principals. Their names were changed, and their school names and locations were not provided to protect their privacy. In order of presentation in this section: Mike, Ted, Colleen and Sam. The similarities for the four were found in the geographical locations of their schools, as well as their educational paths. The humanness and individuality expressed in their interviews demonstrated a connection to the position of school leader, and the commitment felt toward all students. A snapshot statement for each principal interviewed provides an introduction.

Mike is an experienced administrator faced with school culture issues and an inclusion initiative at a new school. Ted is in his first year as a principal, and he says he is “overwhelmed … just trying to survive.” Colleen is about to retire after 34 years in education, and she wonders if things in the field are headed in what she considers to be the right direction. Sam is the principal of an urban school where he earnestly carries on as the “Instructional Leader.” The following are their experiences with special education.

Key Terms

To comprehend each principal’s story, it is important to understand the following key terms that principals used during the interviews:

Response to Intervention (RtI): As outlined in the IDEA, RtI is a “process based on a child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention … [RtI] strategies are tools that enable educators to target instructional interventions to children’s areas of specific need as soon as those needs become apparent.” (34 CFR §§300.307, 300.309 and 300.311; IDEA, 2004) Schools vary
in their approaches to RtI, and they allocate resources differently based on need. For the purposes of these principals’ stories, RtI is programmatic language that describes a tier of instruction where students in need of remediation receive support to address their academic needs.

*MCAS Alternate Assessment* (Alt): The vast majority of students with disabilities take standard paper-and-pencil MCAS tests, either with or without accommodations, at the grade specified for assessment in that subject. A very small number of students with the most significant disabilities, about 1% statewide, take the MCAS Alternate Assessment. Each student’s IEP or 504 team decides how, not whether, the student will participate in MCAS in the coming year. Guidelines used by IEP Teams to make these decisions can be found in the DESE publication, 'Requirements for the Participation of Students with Disabilities in MCAS,' which is updated annually.

The MCAS-Alt consists of a portfolio of materials collected annually by the teacher and student. Evidence for the student portfolio may include work samples, instructional data, videotapes, and other supporting information and materials based on the student's performance in the subject being assessed” (DESE, 2014). Special Education teachers who prepare the Alternate Assessment Portfolios collect student work throughout the year and match it to the required standards. Parents sign the completed portfolio and the students’ participation in the MCAS Alt is reflected on their IEP.

*Responsive Classroom*: A philosophy that combines “six central components that integrate teaching, learning and caring” (Charney, Clayton and Wood, 1995). In practice, it allows the teacher to establish “commonly shared values, such as honesty, fairness, and respect” through the “development and strengthening of social skills, such as cooperation, assertion,
responsibility, empathy and self-control” (p.1-2).

**Student Study Team:** This group of people is also referred to as Child Study or Instructional Student Support Team depending on the school jargon. This is a meeting to discuss concerns about a student. The meetings are “a formalized structure for a group of educators, administrators, and other staff to meet regularly to address concerns about individual students or groups of students” (Massachusetts Tiered System of Support Guide, DESE).

**Substantially Separate Program:** Principals use this term to refer to programs housed in their schools that provide special support to students based on their disability. There are specific criteria that allow students to be placed in these programs. For example, a substantially separate program for students with emotional or behavioral disabilities only accepts students diagnosed with one or more emotional or behavioral disabilities, such as oppositional defiant disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder. Often, these programs are given another name to protect the students. Some names currently used to identify these programs are the Therapeutic Learning Center (referred to as the TLC room), and the Achieve Program for students with cognitive impairments.

**Study Participants**

**Mike**

Mike was interviewed in a conference room at his school. While on the way to the room, Mike greeted staff members and talked about the set-up of the school. He joked about not wearing a tie and was interested in the interviewer’s experience in a doctoral program.

Mike had been teaching for six years and was looking to “explore different things” in education. He enrolled in a leadership program and started applying for other positions. He had applied for a position as a Writing Curriculum Supervisor, and the principal contacted him to see
if he would interview for the Dean of Students position. He was not certified at the time, however he was granted a temporary waiver by the school district and the DESE because he was enrolled in a program. Then, he moved from Dean of Students to Assistant Principal. There was a “conflict with the incoming superintendent” so he was prompted to start looking for a principal position.

He spent two years in one town as principal and, at the time of the interview, had just recently moved to his current position. Overall, he has been a principal for three years and an administrator for eleven. He felt “comfortable being an assistant principal” and was “entrenched in the community,” but when the new superintendent was hired, he felt the “push to move.”

Mike said he was a “wayward soul” and took his time finishing his education. He wanted to major in Urban Studies, but then he began to substitute teach in a public school. He found that he was interested in education and was practical about the lack of jobs in the urban studies field. He got his first teaching position and began his Master’s degree in education. To receive his certification as an administrator, he enrolled in some administration classes. While he was Dean of Students, he completed a practicum following the guidelines for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. He is certified as an assistant principal/principal for elementary and middle schools, as well as assistant superintendent and superintendent. He said he is thinking about getting his doctorate in the near future.

Mike said that his primary responsibility as the principal is to address “morale and community perception.” He said he thought that his priority was going to be the “instructional piece,” but he discovered that most of the staff at his new school is “very strong; they work hard, they are not afraid of change.” His biggest challenges are the “power struggles and control issues” with “co-teaching” and inclusion among a “polarized staff.” Mike said this polarization is
due in part to principal turnover. The staff at his school had a principal for 20 years, but since
that person left, the school has had three principals in the last five years. Mike is “trying to get
that stability” in place and he says his “mantra” is “unity, but not conformity.”

Mike said he arrives at school by 7:15 A.M., and he reads his emails at home prior to
arrival. He calls substitutes in when he gets to school, and he said he believes knowing who is
out gives him “a pulse” on what is happening. He talks to staff members, checks on the before-
school program, greets students as they get off the bus, and then starts checking on classrooms.
He does not do morning announcements because his secretary “sounds happier than I do in the
morning,” and he likes to give her “a little bit of control over something.” He addresses bus
issues and tries to get into classrooms to complete evaluations. He attends meetings with the
administrators, guidance counselor, nurse, outside counseling supports, and parents. He tries to
do lunch duty and attend meetings with staff about planning and data.

Mike said he is working with his staff to support inclusion, and he has reorganized some
of his resources to address the students’ needs better. His focus is on reading, so he hired reading
specialists who are co-teaching in all classrooms. In terms of programming, he oversees three
substantially separate programs in the building: a Therapeutic Program, a Life Skills Program,
and a Language-Based Program. The caseload for each special educator is “manageable” ranging
from eight to 14 students for each teacher. Mike believes he has enough personnel to provide the
community with the necessary “communication” and “placement” that students need.

He said he is “not good at the terminology” to describe the types of disabilities in the
school. He described a student as “severe” and “wheel-chair bound” with “therapies all day
long.” With prompting, Mike also said there are students with emotional and behavioral
diagnoses, specific learning disabilities, and communication disabilities. He also has a student
who has “condition with his nervous system” who has “brain impairments and has multiple seizures throughout the day.”

In terms of testing at the state level, Mike said he thinks the “special ed population seemed high, 20%,” and he saw “a staggering decline in growth” in the special education subgroup. Mike uses the MCAS results to demonstrate the need for continued inclusion because the one year they “did inclusion, just that exposure to the curriculum, helped those scores tremendously.” He said that it has not “been negative so far,” and he wants to “target assistance and support” based on students’ needs. Mike’s school has 427 students, and 14.5% of the students are identified with disabilities.

His approach to special education teachers is to support them through “meeting with them” and trying to “bring them into discussions about staffing.” He wants his teachers to make more of a “connection” with students, especially because that has not “been the priority around here for a number of years.” He also said he thinks that because he “knows the kids, things they are struggling with or succeeding with,” that he is better prepared to “target some help their way.”

Mike had difficulty narrowing his choices for most memorable student because he said there “have been so many of them.” He remembers a student who was an “amazingly charismatic boy with a horrific home life.” Mike tried to get a scholarship for that student because he thought he would have a better chance of staying in school if he attended a private school where he could use his athletic ability. The student did not get a full scholarship however, and eventually he ended up in jail.

Mike’s final thoughts were on the “onslaught of mandates” that the Commonwealth keeps sending to schools. He said that reminded him of another student who had to complete an
MCAS alternate portfolio: “Seeing the completion of the alternate assessment, I think I teared up … does it make sense for some of these kids to be doing this” (Mike, 6/12/2014).

Ted

Ted walked the interviewer into his office, which displayed photos of his new baby and lacked any empty space. There were piles of papers and books covering every surface. He was a soft-spoken man who hesitated often when answering questions.

DESE regulations are clear on fulfilling the necessary requirements for licensure status: To move from a Preliminary licensure to Professional licensure in Massachusetts, Ted had to complete a Master’s Degree within five years of graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. He felt he had a good understanding of elementary education and wanted to concentrate on something he could use “down the road.” He decided to focus on Administration. He said he liked the “leadership aspect,” and felt he had the opportunity during his master’s degree coursework to work “with some great professors and people who are in the field [such as] superintendents and principals.” Ted also had a self-perception that he was a “pretty strong leader in the building.”

Ted reported that when he was teaching, he had implemented some new programs, such as the Responsive Classroom, and other teachers were interested in what he was doing. He said that he did not view this as “power,” but rather as a “change.” He said he thinks he is someone with whom teachers could “share ideas and talk about practice.” He said he was “fascinated [by] looking at new ways to deliver instruction,” and he said wanted to see that “small change” (the Responsive Classroom) through. He waffled between moving toward curriculum work and the principalship. Three aspects in particular that Ted has identified as holding his interest were
“observing teachers and giving feedback … supporting teachers … [and] influencing kids at a larger level.”

As a person, Ted could be classified as a self-starter. He enthusiastically talked about how he managed to pay for school on his own, and how he is always “busy.” In college he double-majored in Elementary Education and Interdisciplinary Studies, and he took enough courses to also graduate with a Minor. Simultaneously, he worked full-time and was the president of his schools’ chapter of Kappa Delta Pi. Upon graduation, he took a job-teaching grade six, and he “brought” Responsive Classroom and the methodology of that approach to his school. He “started taking on some leadership roles,” such as leading “workshops and professional development” which he said he “really enjoyed.” He moved within his school district to another grade level to teach mathematics.

At that time, he was working through his Master’s Degree program and thinking about taking a position in administration. His school posted a new position for an RtI Specialist, which he applied for and filled. He stayed there for two years until the principal’s position at the same district’s elementary school posted. Ted decided “to give it a shot, [and] things worked out in [his] favor.” At the time of the interview, Ted was completing his first year as a principal.

As the end of his year approached, Ted said he was “looking more toward the future,” which was “exciting” to him. He said that he is just “starting to get more comfortable” as a principal. He likened the experience of his first year as principal to his first year of teaching, saying he felt “overwhelmed” and like he was just “trying to get through the day.” Ted said he had to stop “mid-year and say, ‘this isn’t fun for me,’” and he had a long talk with the Superintendent of Schools, who helped him. He used the word “overwhelming” as a blanket description of his position.
Facing his day, Ted decides what “has to be done first,” and what can wait. He keeps lists of people he needs to talk to and what things must be completed. He said he struggles with wanting to “get into classrooms more” and being “visible.” Specific things that overwhelm him include “human resources, management and facilities, and not micromanaging” people. He feels the need to “keep things afloat,” but would rather be “guiding and getting people’s ideas and feedback … steering them in the direction that [he] would like to see the school moving.” He said he is “still learning” and has a “vision in mind,” but that he needs to “figure out strategies for how to work with people, and kind of gently nudge them” toward his vision. Ted said that he feels the eyes of his staff on him, and that he is trying to establish a level of “trust” through “a lot of watching and learning.”

Ted has a long day at school. He is one of the first to arrive, after the “maintenance” person. He looks at “scheduling … voicemails,” writes a “morning message,” and greets students as they enter the building. Ted had a hard time describing a typical day “because they are not typical,” he said. He attends many meetings, such as special education, Leadership, Technology Committee, Data Team, Literacy Committee, and Educator Evaluation meetings. He tries to “block off time” daily to observe in classrooms, and he is working on developing “a system” to keep track of what he has seen. He attempts to “catch those people in passing and try to give them some feedback on something” from the observation.

Ted does not have a special education background and he is “just learning all of the regulations and the processes” that need to be in place for students. He characterized his school as an inclusion school that is “in kind of a transition” because the former principal was primarily responsible for many of the special education procedures. She is now the Special Education Director for his district, and he tries to use her as a resource.
He described services that are primarily delivered by paraprofessionals who are supervised by special education liaisons. The paraprofessionals provide some services to students who need more intense instruction in a separate setting. He said that their speech therapist is part-time at his school. She works with the guidance counselor to provide support for social skills in class, as well as at lunch and recess where students may need assistance on the spot. The staff at his school have “varying amounts of backgrounds in special education,” and he said he feels that he is personally getting “fairly comfortable, but it’s been a shift” that he finds “fascinating.”

Working with students who are on the autism spectrum at his school is a priority for Ted. He does not know what other types of disabilities are present in his school, however the students with autism require consultation from a behavioral specialist that Ted talks to following weekly observations. There are also some students with “health” and “attentional issues” who require accommodations.

Ted’s school is small; it is comprised of only 111 students. This means that “a lot of our subgroups don’t get reported,” he said. His district has not placed “a lot of emphasis on state-wide testing,” but because this is his first year, he said he feels that it is “early in the game for [him] to make a judgment on that.” He said there is no pressure from the school’s “isolated community,” and they do not “really ask a lot of questions or put demands on the school.”

Ted said he wants the staff to look more closely at statewide testing because he feels that their scores “could be better.” He wants the staff to look at the MCAS differently. Currently, they talk about “teaching to the test” and he wants them to see that they are “teaching to the standards,” and that the test “is going to assess” the student attainment of state standards. He said
he feels that his answer about special education and the effect of subgroups on their school “is not a great answer,” but it is probably accurate at this time.

When asked about the characteristics of his best special education teacher, Ted hesitated. He only has one special education teacher and she is not his ideal, although he said he thinks “she is a very nice person.” Prompted to describe what qualities a special educator should have, he had an easier time. He described a person who is organized, knowledgeable, and who looks at “the whole child” and can “put a plan of action that is unique to the student in place.” He would like the special education teacher to know the student’s family, be “effective supporting the parents, [and] help the teachers.” He would like someone who is “independent … efficient [and who] meets deadlines.” Right now, he supports his one special educator by meeting with her regularly. He said they are “learning together” and that they both “need more training” to make better use of student data. He wants his special education teacher to look at the student data and say, “what are our decisions” based on how the student is progressing. He says “supporting is just sort of asking a lot of questions” and “finding out who can help” his teacher.

Ted was quick to answer about his most memorable student. He was animated, talking with his hands and smiling. It was a student he had in his second year of teaching. The student was one who “struggled” and had a lot of “anger; he was self-mutilating,” and was often “frustrated” and “trying to get a reaction out of you” for his behavior. Ted questioned whether he would be “able to handle this child” at the start of the year. He wanted to “give him every chance to let him be who he is” and to “listen to him” throughout the year. He believes this was the key to their successful year “all because I listened to him…I don’t know if anyone had done that.”

The boy did not want “to talk about anything emotional,” but he would talk about books. Ted cultivated his interest in books and the student became a better reader and student. Ted said
he saw the boy recently, and he is now a United States Marine. Ted said he believes in the value that social learning brought to his class, and the use of the Responsive Classroom techniques promoted respect within the classroom community. He said it made a difference for students such as this one.

Ted said that he still uses these techniques to foster a sense of belonging for everyone in his school. He said his goal is to “get them to be social learners” which will help with “academic skills, learning and listening” (Ted, 5/28/2014).

Colleen

Colleen was interviewed in a conference room at her school. She was running late at the time and grabbed a Diet Coke as the interview began. The immediate impression upon meeting Colleen was one of honesty, sincerity, and openness.

Colleen had been a teacher for a decade when she began to feel that she could channel her “critical” thoughts about her administrators and perhaps do a “better” job than they were doing. Colleen lived in a town centrally located to her teaching stations and administrative positions. She was close to the state college that she attended for all of her undergraduate and graduate coursework. Colleen obtained a Bachelor’s Degree in Early Childhood Education and a Master’s Degree in Elementary Education, then completed her second Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership. She undertook the second Master's program so that she could become an administrator in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. She is certified as a kindergarten through grade eight teacher, and as a principal/assistant principal for elementary and middle school.

When Colleen started in the assistant principal position, she thought that she would stay for a few years to “get her feet wet” and gain some experience, and then possibly take over for
the existing principal when he/she retired. Instead of remaining the Assistant Principal for a few years, she took over the Principal position the next year after a surprise retirement. After another decade as principal, she decided she needed a “change” because she was “exhausted.”

Colleen’s Superintendent of Schools created a position at the central-office level for her. Instead of being rejuvenated by the change however, she knew instantly that she was not a central-office person; she said she missed the kids too much. After one year of writing grants and overseeing professional development, she left to return to the principal position in a different town.

Colleen said that she relies on her connection with students to keep her going, which is what she missed after taking the position at her district central office. She said she knows that “every district has its problems, but when things get really bad … I’ll be down in the kindergarten or first grade. I’ve got to get loved; I have to feel like somebody values me.”

Colleen reflected on her time in education: “Education has been my life. I don’t know anything else,” she said. She also thinks changing things up is a key to her longevity in education. She would be “bored doing the same thing year after year.” As a principal “every day is different.”

Colleen makes lists to prioritize her day. She addresses situations as they arise, but said she often hopes, “Dear God, don’t let anything happen today that I can’t handle.” Most of her time is spent “running meetings” and handling special education programs housed at her school. She edits and checks IEPs, works through the SST, and oversees RtI. She tries to find time to complete teacher evaluations, but feels she has a “very difficult time making those timelines and getting those walkthroughs” done. She said that “something’s got to give,” and she used the word “marvel” when talking about other principals who “leave the job at 4:00 [P.M.].”
Her day begins at 6:30 A.M. and ends around 6:00 P.M., unless she has a meeting scheduled that evening. She writes emails, calls in substitutes, and greets students as they get off the bus. She meets with teachers, calls parents, returns phone calls, and she attends meetings. Frustration surrounds her administrator meetings at the central office. After those meetings, she must “decompress and let the anger out” by eating M&M’s and processing with her Assistant Principal. Her responsibilities also include overseeing an extended-day program at the school.

Colleen cites a recent tragedy at a local school where a student was killed at an after-school program when a television fell on him. She said she had “nightmares” and feels even more compelled to be always-present at the school. Her commitment to her position is clear: “It’s your life,” she said.

At Colleen’s school, the staff follows special education process for reviewing student progress at Annual Reviews and Three-Year Reevaluation meetings. Some students come from their early childhood program already on an IEP. The school provides services including “OT, PT, Speech [and] Resource Room,” and there are two classrooms that are substantially separate programs. Those classrooms service students from the district’s five towns. Colleen’s school uses the RtI process for “struggling” students. There is documentation involved, as well as periodic testing. She said she worries when teachers come to her with students who struggle and are “not making progress;” because her school does not have Title 1 support, special education is the only source for extra help. “We work very hard to qualify [children] because we have nothing else to offer them,” she said.

Colleen said she sees the “gap widening” for students. At her school, they also place students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder on 504 plans. She reports that in the past they would opt for an IEP because her Superintendent “felt we got more money if
they were on your Special Education roster.” There is a new director of special education, and Colleen said she sees things changing.

Colleen makes sure that everything is set for special education meetings. Reports have to be sent to parents ahead of time, and “it is our policy that the IEP is developed, signed and approved, and signed off by the principal, and in the hands of the parents within five days.” Pushback from special education personnel is something she deals with, however her philosophy is to “get it done.” Friction also accompanies special education meetings from the parents of special education students. She has dealt with “happy” parents, but she has also gone to “hearings” about services. There is sometimes “fighting and arguing,” and she feels that people “lose sight” of what is important. She sympathizes with parents because they “grieve” about their child’s disability when the “gap” becomes wider.

Colleen is a principal who wants to know her students, which is why she greets them in the morning and talks to them at lunch and recess. She says she understands the parents’ grief because she sees the lack of “friendships” that the students with special needs at her school have. She said she has sat with parents as “they cry because their child never gets invited to a birthday party.” She also refers students and parents to the school psychologist and the Autism Resource Center for support.

The special education population at Colleen’s school is 12.9% of the total student body (DESE). There are 373 students at the school, and 48 have identified special needs. Colleen indicated that some students have diagnoses of autism, specific learning disabilities, intellectual impairments and health issues, such as Rhetts and Cerebral Palsy. Students with social or emotional diagnoses attend a program at another district elementary school. She had 15 students
take the MCAS Alternate Assessment, which involved “collecting evidence and data.” She said it is “a total waste of time.”

There are accommodations that special education students need to have during testing, which Colleen said is a “challenge.” She is working with her staff to make testing more reasonable for students. She asks teachers, “How would you feel if I sat next to you while you were writing an IEP -- watching you do that?” She thinks about whether or not a student is “comfortable” in a one-on-one testing environment instead of a more natural setting. She laments the whole MCAS testing process even though hers is a “Level 1” school. The special education programs are “impacting those scores,” and “everybody starts comparing schools based on the Warning rate, and you can’t say ‘it’s the special ed kids!'”

Colleen’s best special education teacher is “caring, knowledgeable, and has good communication skills.” There are two special educators in her building and Colleen speaks highly of them both. They have developed the ability to interact with parents effectively and they know the families in town well. She supports her special educators by “respecting” them and valuing what they do. She also provides opportunities for them to meet their timelines, such as excusing them from a meeting. She believes that this results in reciprocity when she requires them to complete a task quickly.

When asked about her most memorable student, Colleen got emotional. She blew her nose and was choked up. The switch for her in questions from the practical side of the principal’s experience to pinpointing one student gave her pause. She described a student she knew over a period of many years. He developed friendships with some students enrolled in a special education program. These students had significant developmental delays and the boy she identified as memorable stood out to her because he befriended them, even though he knew it
was not “cool” to do. Colleen described a time when she told the boys’ parents about how much she admired his ability to look past disabilities and include students who may not have been invited to do things before. A few years later, this boy got into some trouble, and he called Colleen to apologize personally. She was quiet for a while after telling the story and then said, “I had faith in him and he felt he let me down. So, that was the hardest question, I just want you to know” (Colleen, 4/29/2014).

Sam

Sam was interviewed at his school shortly after the arrival of students one morning. He completed the morning announcements as the interviewer sat in the central-office area. His greeting was jovial and welcoming. His office was noisy and crowded with furniture, papers and family pictures. He jumped right into the interview, joking about “rethinking” moving from teaching to the principalship. He taught for seven years prior to becoming an administrator, and said he “had a calling to do something greater and wanted to affect change.” He wanted to “help teachers at a different level” and change systems and students.” He completed the requirements for his licensure, as well as a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies which he did “quickly,” and received the certification. He said on the road to becoming an elementary school principal, he “really just wanted to make a difference at a larger level.”

Sam said that his whole life has been about education, starting in high school when he worked as an after-school director at a local elementary school. He became a paraprofessional following his high school graduation and while simultaneously attending college with no declared major. He “enjoyed working with kids” and decided to major in education. During college, he continued working in after-school programs and daycare facilities. Upon graduation, he was hired as a fifth grade teacher. He taught both fifth and sixth grade while working on his
Master’s Degree in Reading, then decided to enroll in a principal licensure program to become licensed in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. As soon as he was licensed, he began applying for Assistant Principal positions, and took a position in an urban school. He was the Assistant Principal for three years, and is now the Principal of the same school.

He sees his role as a principal as the “Instructional Leader,” and not “the manager” of the school, as he once viewed it. He relies on the other administrators, an Assistant Principal and a Student Program Support Administrator (SPSA), to complete the “day-to-day management” and scheduling. He spends one day per week in data meetings and the remainder of the week he is in the classrooms. He has to “spend at least two hours in the classrooms doing walkthroughs and giving feedback to teachers” daily, and the rest of his day is spent “doing the evaluation piece and working on curriculum.”

Sam said that prioritizing his responsibilities is “difficult” because they change so quickly. He makes a “list of things” he has scheduled, but he will rearrange his schedule to meet with parents. He works to identify what is “critical” and focuses on what has to get done. “You never know what’s going to come up,” he said. “I have to address issues that come up and then I immediately go back to the evaluations, the walkthroughs and the curriculum piece.”

He arrives at school around 7:00 A.M. and begins his day “checking emails” to see if there are any “parent issues, teacher emails, anything from central office that needs to get done.” He goes to the cafeteria to oversee the breakfast program, where students are dropped off or walk to school to eat. He meets with the person who calls in substitute teachers for the building to understand who is out and what classes he may have to check on throughout the day. Following the morning announcements, he tries to do walkthroughs of classes when not in meetings. Sam’s meetings include gathering with grade level teachers, instructional coaches, guidance meetings,
administrator meetings, parent meetings, and special education meetings. He has separate meetings with the SPSA and his Assistant Principal regarding homeless students and students in custody of the Department of Children and Families. His priority is getting into classrooms to observe teachers. Following the school day, he writes his evaluations and uses the time until around 6:00 P.M. to check and answer emails, return phone calls and analyze student data.

When asked about the special education services and how they come to life at his school, Sam described the process that struggling students and teachers are involved in. He called it the START process (Student Teacher Assessment Review Team) which is comprised of the Assistant Principal, guidance counselor, special education teacher, Title 1 teacher, and regular education teachers. They meet when a teacher has a concern about a student. There is a process to set goals for the student and to follow-up on progress. He says that this is a change from how they “used to deal with SPED.” Previously, when a teacher had a concern, the teacher would meet with some special education staff and the principal or assistant principal with the outcome always leading directly to a special education evaluation. This new procedure has resulted in “some progress, especially with the reading” and Sam believes that the “interventions we are giving and putting into place are helping.” When students continue to struggle or do not meet the set goals, they start a referral for testing.

His school building “houses the autism population” in his city. There are 60 students diagnosed with autism in his school. There are also many students diagnosed with Specific Learning Disability (SLD), and some students with developmental delay. He said he has about 200 students on IEP’s. The other elementary schools in his city have programs for students with severe cognitive delays and emotional and/or behavioral diagnoses. There are 644 students at his school and 22.8% are identified as special education students according to the DESE.
When asked about statewide testing, Sam perked right up. He is proud of the fact that under his guidance, the school has increased inclusion and the scores of their special education students. He started this change slowly with “a little at every grade level so we had at least one class that was pretty much inclusion.” His scores for the special education subgroup had previously “dipped 10 points,” and he attributed this to the switch to the common core standards, which special education students were not receiving in the pullout setting. He saw “this as a problem” and it was “one of the areas I had to fix right away,” he said. When the staff saw that the scores for those students rose “12 points from 48 to 60” and the “teachers saw that growth” they “bought into it.” One of the ongoing problems he sees is that many of the students with autism complete the alternate assessment, which is a time-consuming process for the staff. He said the key is to “pay attention to the details and make sure that everything is there that they are asking for” and include “every data point.”

Sam was quick to answer a question about the characteristics of his best special education teacher: “Someone who really believes that the special education students can learn.” He has two teachers in particular who “will do whatever it takes to get these kids where they need to be.” Sam contrasted these teachers with several other staff members who “really believe that [the students] are special education, and they are set out to be that for the rest of their lives.” The teachers who are his models “come in early to provide extra assistance,” and they “believe that these kids can succeed … motivation piece is there” with the teacher. Sam said he thinks that translates to students' progress. The special education teachers also see how his implementation of inclusion is affecting positive change for students as they are “exposed to the common core standards and get it.”
Sam meets regularly with his special education teachers. He supports them when they are writing IEP goals because they are implementing a new system his teachers “struggle” with managing. He also started a book study where they read sections and discuss what they have read each week. Sam hired an “inclusion specialist who is coming in to train those teachers doing the inclusion piece.”

“We’ve been asking them to do a lot, but we’ve been supporting them and providing them with professional development,” he said. He also feels that he has provided time to his staff to meet with each other during common planning time which has “been beneficial” for the staff.

His most memorable student is one that attends his school currently. Sam met the student when he was the assistant principal. This is his fourth year with the student, who has a diagnosis of autism. When the student first came to Sam's school, the staff wanted to place him in a private special education school. Sam had “to convince the staff that he belonged here,” and he worked with the special education teachers and the parents to “get the diagnosis so we could put the supports in place that he needed.” Sam said the student has a “photographic memory, and he is an absolute genius” who, “by the way -- no longer hits, slaps or bites.” He does still have issues at school, but because they have what he needs in place, he is making progress.

Before inclusion, the student had a one-to-one paraprofessional assigned to him, as well as pullout and consultant services. Sam is proud of the student’s progress and is thrilled that he “believed in him,” even though “it was hard.” Sam “had to convince a lot of people” to also see the student's potential, it worked out, he said. The student is “a great part of the school and community.” Sam said that his experience with this student reinforced his personal beliefs in the possibilities “when somebody makes a difference” for individual students. Sam said that “it takes a village” for every child. When discussing this memorable student, Sam also said that “he’s not
fixed, but he is successful, and he is here, and he is learning, and that’s our goal” (Sam, 11/7/2014).

**Study Analysis**

The questions asked in this study were about the factors that contribute to principals’ proficiencies with special education, the demographic contributors of the principals participating, the view of principals’ experiences with special education, and how the time spent on special education issues shapes their experiences.

All of the principals interviewed started their education careers as teachers in elementary schools. There was a progression for all of them in terms of taking at least one step in between teacher and principal positions. Three of the four were assistant principals prior to becoming principals. The fourth principal held the position of RtI Coordinator between teaching and becoming a principal. There were other positions at other points in their careers, such as Professional Development and Grant Writer, and Dean of Students.

In terms of their educational backgrounds, all four principals hold both Bachelor's and Master's Degrees, but there are variations in the concentrations of their studies. The Bachelor's degrees are in early childhood education, general education, elementary education, and urban studies. The Master's degrees are in elementary education, reading, administration and education. In order to receive their administrative licensure from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, three of the four principals took further steps in their educations. One completed another Master's Degree in Educational Leadership, one enrolled in a specific administrative licensure program approved by the state of Massachusetts, and one completed necessary courses as well as practicum hours as outlined by the DESE. The preparation was different for all. All four principals completed their studies at state colleges: Fitchburg State University (formerly
Fitchburg State College), Framingham State University (formerly Framingham State College) and Worcester State University (formerly Worcester State College). The licensure program completed by one principal was through the Merrimack Education Collaborative (MEC).

The four principals responded to the view of their role as principal differently. Colleen clearly sees her role involving "safety, human contact, and special education." Sam sees himself as there to "change," be the "Instructional Leader," and be an "evaluator." Mike is more involved in different aspects of morale, such as school culture. He specifically referred to "community perception" and building "unity" at the school. He also talked about "change," inclusion and co-teaching as part of his principal role. Ted sees himself as a "director--leading and guiding." All four noted that change plays a seminal role in being a principal, although each one mentioned change affecting a different facet of their jobs.

When describing how they prioritize their days, three principals talked about lists. Three also spoke about the extensive teacher evaluation process. All four principals expressed that when situations come up, their priorities change in order to address more immediate needs. They referred specifically to when situations with a parent or student arise, and they have to take immediate steps to deal with the issue at hand.

A typical day for all four principals starts early morning. All start their days around 7:00 A.M. and work until 6:00 P.M. -- or for two of the principals, "until whenever." All four principals discussed emails, substitute teachers, phone calls, busses, and meetings when describing a typical day.

The types of meetings that the principals noted attending also share similarities. They said they have School Council, Administrator, IEP, Curriculum, Parent-Teacher Association
(PTA), Data Special Education and Grade level meetings, as well as meetings with Instructional Coaches, Nurses, Guidance, parents, and outside providers.

When asked to describe how special education comes to life at their schools, the four principals provided distinctly different accounts. Two described the special education process for a student to receive services. They described the referral process, -- RtI, START or SST, as well as the documentation of the procedures at their school. The remaining two principals spoke more about their inclusion models for students, and how they see that as special education coming to life in their schools.

In delineating the types of disabilities that students at their schools have, they provided lists of various disabilities. All four referenced Autism. Two of the principals expressed the sense that their ability to list disabilities might not be the best, and one said "I'm not good at the terminology." The other one said, "I am just learning this; I have no sped experience." The other two principals listed some specific disabilities, such as Down's Syndrome, Rhetts, Developmental Delay, Social/Emotional Disabilities, Specific Learning Disability, Intellectual, Visual Impairment, and Deafness.

All four principals reacted with sighs, eye rolls and grimaces when asked about the effect of statewide testing on their special education subgroups. One said that his school does not place much emphasis on statewide testing at this time. Two principals talked specifically about student growth in their special education subgroups and the amount of exposure to the regular curriculum that the special education students receive. Those two both made the connection for the benefit of inclusion and providing access to the regular education curriculum for students with special needs. The other principal referenced the testing as a "waste of time" and questioned
if the test was "fair" for students. She made the connection to special education students and statewide testing to feelings of "failure" and "hurt."

Describing their best special education teachers, one principal said that the special education teacher should be someone who is "thinking about the whole child" and who "understands student needs." He did not think he had a "best" special education teacher at his school, so he had to describe his ideal person. He said that person should be "organized." The other three principals talked about attributes of their special educators -- caring, knowledgeable, motivated, supportive, flexible, and communicative -- and one specifically talked about the ability to "believe that special education students can learn."

In terms of supporting their special education personnel, all four principals "meet" with their special educators. One is learning alongside his special education staff. One provides candy to her teachers, she proofreads their IEP's and she respects them. The two remaining principals provide other kinds of support. One has a professional development plan involving consultants, book studies, and feedback from walkthrough observations. The other one involves his teachers in the decision-making process for students and for staffing decisions.

When they talked about their most memorable student, all four principals provided personal stories. One talked about a student he had in the classroom who was "often misunderstood." The student had emotional issues, and he was memorable because the principal thought that he made a difference for that student. One principal said a student whom she respected because of the outreach he did daily with some students with special needs was her most memorable. Another principal said that a student he has in his school and has worked with for five years -- who he thinks would have been put in an out-of-district placement if not for his ability to see his potential -- was his most memorable. The last principal described a student who
he knew as a teacher, who had a "horrific home life" was his most memorable. He tried to get him a scholarship to a private school based on his sports ability, however it was only funded partially and the student eventually wound up going to jail.
Chapter Five

Discussion of Research Findings

Importance of Principals

The four principals interviewed are in the “load-bearing role as a school’s instructional leader and the individual most responsible for fostering a positive climate” (Prothero, 2015 p.10). This is in line with the “pivotal” role previously addressed (Fullan, p.5). The experiences described by the principals demonstrate their commitment to the job, and the responses mirrored what the recent MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leaders said: “Schools are important because the future resides there” (MetLife, 2013 p.1).

Emerging Themes

Four themes emerge from analysis of responses from the four principals: knowledge, time, the need to do what is best for students, and the feeling of being overwhelmed. The questions under study were:

1. What factors contribute to principals’ proficiencies with special education?
   - What are the demographic contributors of the principals participating (certifications, philosophy of education, view of special education over their time as a principal, percentage of students in their school with identified disabilities, MCAS scores of subgroups)?

2. How do principals view their experiences with special education?
   - Does the time spent on special education issues shape their experiences (time at IEP meetings, attending Student Support Teams, communication with parents, behavioral incidents, competency of special education staff)?
Knowledge

The principals interviewed see themselves as researchers do: as a leader and/or manager (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008; DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003; Fullan, 2008; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins, and Harris 2006). In discussing their positions, the word “know” appeared 245 times. This was in reference to self-knowledge, understanding the expectations of the position, knowledge of special education and disabilities, and knowing their school well.

Colleen, Ted, Mike and Sam know they hold the proper certifications to be principals in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. They all were prepared to be educators at state schools: Framingham State University, Fitchburg State University, and Worcester State University. Three of the principals hold Master’s Degrees, one has a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study and two principals referenced thinking about pursuing a doctoral degree. Colleen reported that she did not enroll in a program because it would not have resulted in any monetary gains. Mike was interested in the experience of the researcher, asking about the program at Northeastern University. He reported that he thought a doctorate was in his future and was thinking about enrolling in a program soon. The principals were not asked directly about their philosophy of education, however through analysis of their responses the picture is of hard-working dedicated individuals. Statements such as Colleen’s characterize their values and beliefs: “education has been it for me -- it’s my life.” Mike’s view is practical: “I mean who doesn’t love kindergarten?”

The view of special education over their time as a principal ties directly to knowing their school. The language of special education was inconsistent among the principals, although all four referenced inclusion and the importance of students with special needs being members of
the school community. All four of the principals believe that inclusion works for students with special needs.

Colleen was the most knowledgeable in terms of identifying and naming disabilities; she has been a principal for fourteen years and has the most experience out of the four principals. Sam and Mike both knew the exact percentage of students in their school with identified disabilities, and work with their staff to analyze MCAS scores of subgroups. Ted is a first-year principal, and his school is so small that special education subgroups are not large enough to be reported, however he acknowledges that all of his students should be “doing better” on state testing.

The knowledge that these principals possess about what is expected from a principal varied in accordance with the number of years on the job and their initial preparation as administrators. Their descriptions are not as extreme as the characterization of “battlefield commanders,” however they are intensely aware that they need to know every aspect of what occurs in their buildings (Hess and Kelley, 2006, p.2). They do, as research says, feel the responsibility of safeguarding the school so all students receive instruction in a place where the “climate …provides consistent and frequent opportunities for growth” (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers and Delzell, 2006, p. 153). Mike identified his highest priority as addressing the “morale and community perception” in the wake of administrator turnover and subsequent trust issues. The principal, as leader of the school reads the culture and sets the mission and vision. Knowing how to work with the staff and students to provide an educational experience that is positive is an ongoing task for principals such as Mike.

Because the principal is a manager as well as leader, their “role” has become more “complex” and they must be “more than operational managers;” they must “be instructional
leaders as well” (Wakeman et al., 2006, p.153). The principal as the “instructional leader” in the elementary school means they need to provide “strong, directive leadership focused on curriculum and instruction” (Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008, p. 459) (Hallinger, 2003, p.229). Ted does not feel that he has the knowledge he truly needs to do his job adequately. He refers to a “lack of knowledge” and said, “I am kind of learning this on my own.” He specifically referenced “all of the regulations and the processes” as they apply to special education. This is important because research says that “the domain of the principal leading knowledgeably” is essentially learning “what needs to be known -- about the child, about teaching and learning, and about the use of data as a strategy for both improvement and accountability” (Fullan, WWFF, 2008). Also, given that the principalship is “incredibly more complex and substantially different from what it was even a short time ago,” Ted may experience difficulty leading his school (Fullan, p. 5). If a principal does not possess the knowledge of special education and disabilities to properly fulfill the role, it could negatively affect the outcomes of this vulnerable population. “Most principals believe they were prepared well for their responsibilities as school principal,” so it was telling that Ted was so honest in his acknowledgement of his deficiency specific to special education (Metlife, 2013, p.34).

There was variability in the production of terminology related to special education. This points to a lack of specific training in their preparation. All of the principals interviewed were elementary educators prior to becoming administrators; none had completed certifications in special education. This could account for the variability in the production of terminology related to special education. They used some of this vocabulary but not always with the same names: autism, developmental delay, intellectual impairment, sensory impairment (hearing, vision, or deaf/blind), neurological impairment, emotional impairment, communication impairment,
physical impairment, health impairment, or specific learning disability. All of the principals oversee the process for identification of students with disabilities. To accomplish this task, principals need to have “fundamental knowledge of special education as well as knowledge of current issues in special education” (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006, p. 154). There is a disconnect between the process in place for students with special needs and the knowledge and use of language related to special education and disabilities.

School leaders also must “manage” and lead. All four of the principals interviewed feel that they try their very best to manage and lead their schools. Overshadowing this job are “increased expectations to strengthen educational outcomes” (MetLife Survey of The American Teacher; Challenges for School Leaders, 2013, p.3). Knowing that school and student performance on state testing is part of their evaluations makes it important that principals are able to “ensure that all students -- not just some -- master content and are able to apply knowledge “ (Metlife, 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, “research has established the empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement” (Metlife,2013, p.23)

In terms of knowledge related to special education, school principals “need a deep understanding of students with disabilities and how to effectively support these students” to truly lead the school and staff (Gaddy, McNulty, and Waters, 2002, p. 7). More than thirty years ago, this was also true: “knowledge of the nature and needs of handicapped youngsters is mandatory for intelligent decision-making by principals” (Cline, 1981 p. 172). Today, these principals are aware that what they know and how they approach their responsibilities is essential for students. Sam said, “really, I really truly am the Instructional Leader of the school. The days of the principal being a manager and not [just] a leader has changed.” Knowledge of special education mandates, disabilities, and the procedures developed at the elementary school level is essential.
Knowing the importance of building relationships is vital to all of the principals. They all meet regularly with staff members, increasing their teamwork and communication about student progress as well as planning. This demonstrates their understanding that “in addition to their role as instructional leaders helping to develop good teaching, effective principals are also collaborators, cultivating the leadership of teachers and others in their schools.” (Metlife, 2013, p.23)

These meetings are referred to differently from school to school: Student Support Meetings, Child Study, and Staffing Meeting are some names that local schools use in Massachusetts. Bays and Crockett (2007) also identified seven other areas where principals are involved in the special education needs of students: “parent conferences,” “discussions with teachers and guidance counselors,” “meetings with agency personnel,” “phone calls to directors of special education,” “faculty meetings,” “teacher observations,” and “interactions with individual students” (p. 148). All of the principals express knowing that holding meetings is a significant part of their position as a school principal.

Long days are a regular occurrence for all of the principals. They know that every day is different and they try to use their knowledge to prioritize. These “education leaders must not only manage school finances, keep buses running on time, and make hiring decisions, but they must also be instructional leaders, data analysts, community relations officers, and change agents” (ISLLC, 2008, p. 3). Today, they “play a key role in school improvement and improving student outcomes” (Waldron, McLesky and Redd, 2011, p. 51).

The student achievement that principals oversee holds a place of importance for Collen. She said, “I really want it to succeed, so that’s half the battle right there.” This exemplifies her attitude, which works to her providing a model for staff. “Principals need to demonstrate
appropriate attitudes and behaviors regarding inclusion for the faculty as the instructional leaders of the school” (Horrocks, White, Roberts, 2008, p.1464). Teachers provide a model for students in the attitudes they present in the classroom: “The attitudes and behaviors of educational professionals toward the integration of disabled children into regular education programs are critical since non-disabled students model the attitudes and behaviors of adults” (Horrocks, p.1464). Mike said,

“So we are kind of shifting that philosophy in the school, too. The MCAS can be a guide for us in the way that it can help us make decisions. It’s been kind of a slow change, so as far as our special education population, you know, I don’t really know that yet, and I know that’s not a great answer, but…”

In other studies that have looked at principals’ views, some “showed they supported the benefits of inclusion, while others revealed a tendency for low expectations for success” (Horrocks, p.1464). It appears that all of the principals interviewed support their special education population and are trying to ensure successful outcomes on state mandated testing.

Colleen described the “two district-wide Special Ed, substantially separate programs” that are housed in her school building. She said, “those kids come from all five towns, so those meetings are much more intense and have many more players sitting because they get just about every service that they need.” Sam talked about his responsibility to “chair the district-wide programs that are housed” at his school, which means he supervises the development of IEP’s and the dissemination of information regarding student progress.

Sam said,
“I felt like I had a calling to do something greater and I wanted to affect change: change systems and change students and help teachers at a different level. I found that being a principal allowed me to do that.”

Mike said, “I really wanted to be a principal,” and Ted said he “saw the change [he] could make” in the role of the principal. Serving as a building principal is a “major responsibility” that these principals feel driven to take on (Robson, p.378). It could be that these principals have the necessary “traits” to lead the school (Northouse, p. 533). They require “intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability” which would assist them in understanding themselves, understanding how to reach expected outcomes of their positions, and knowing their school well enough to help all students achieve (p. 539). In the research conducted as preparation for this project, many studies looked at leadership of all students, however none “of these studies had addressed the issue of educating students with disabilities” (Boscardin, p. 69).

**Time**

Thirty-seven requests for interview participation were sent out to Massachusetts principals. Only five responded. Four interviews were conducted, and time was a concern voiced by all of the participants. One principal cancelled because she was too pressed for time. The interviewed principals regularly work an average of ten to eleven hours per day. Often they attend meetings, including Parent Conference nights, school functions such as concerts and plays, and School Committee Meetings. During the school day, their time is taken up addressing situations as they arise. They spend time on phone calls, emails, and communication with the members of the school community. Much of their days are spent in team meetings, data meetings, Professional Learning Community meetings (PLCs), Student Support Teams, and meetings with other staff members and parents.
According to one of the principals, special education takes up the “majority of his time.” Colleen reported that completing the MCAS Alternate Assessments is a “complete waste of time.” Sam said that some of the things he has to do in terms of preparing for the MCAS are a “total waste of everybody’s time.” The principals interviewed follow the requisite timelines and procedures necessary to provide special education services as outlined by the state and federal guidelines, and they recognize the need to spend time at IEP meetings.

Legislative mandates have set the tone for special education. The principals follow the “free, appropriate public education for children with disabilities” and the provision for an “IEP” as well as the “requirement that schools actively involve parents in planning” and that “students with disabilities be placed in the least restrictive environment” (Gaddy, McNulty, Waters, 2002, p. 2). As previously stated, the research shows that these mandates have “enhanced the principal’s accountability” and that “special education has become a major concern for school leaders” (Bays and Crockett, 2007, p. 143). It is a concern for all of the principals: Sam approaches things with a “critical and focused” eye so students receive the necessary intervention. Both Sam and Mike use data meetings to discuss student progress and plan for instruction. This takes time away from being present during the goings on of students' days. Ted mentioned that he has to “try to get out and see the kids -- because you’ve been in here in meetings” all day. To ensure that students receive proper instruction,

“administrators must be vigilant about maintaining quality and doggedly monitor academic outcomes and classroom practices to ensure that programs designed for students with special leaning needs do not become 'dumping grounds' that further marginalize the students they were designed to help” (Boykin and Noguera, 2011, p. 187).
All of the administrators interviewed see challenges in managing their time and balancing all the demands of their jobs.

Current practices demonstrate that the principal is in a position to be a member of the team, evaluate teacher and student performance, and set the school culture by modeling for staff, parents, and students (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006; Lazaridou, 2009; Bays and Crockett, 2007). As a member of the school team, principals need to attend meetings while leading and managing their school buildings. Mike stated a thought that all four principals echoed: “it is really hard for me to say what a typical day is for me, because they are not typical.” What is typical is the extensive time the four principals commit to things related to special education.

The Need to do What is Best for Students

The principals view student needs and the staff who support them as a priority. They are leaders who “provide direction” for staff (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstom, 2004, p. 20). For Colleen, this starts with the children and “knowing my kids and their families” which is something she prides herself on, also stating that principals are like “mother hens.” All four principals attempt to lead from a place that is “grounded in firm personal and professional values” (Glover p. 4). Sam said he became a principal because he liked the idea of “influencing kids just at obviously a larger level” and the principal is in a place to accomplish this task. Mike’s view that “you become entrenched in the community” and how “that familiarity is so nice,” demonstrates his idea that he is an integral part of the whole. Ted said of one student, “I’m going to give him every chance to let him be who he is, and I’m going to help him and listen to him,” which speaks to how much he cares about the students at his school.
The principals also wished for competency in the teachers who provide service students with special needs. The words they used in describing the characteristics of their best special education teachers demonstrated a high level of dedication to the mission of educating students. Sam described his best special education teacher as “someone who really believes that the special education students can learn” and said his special education staff “are people who will do whatever it takes to get these kids to where they need to be.” Colleen said her best special education teacher was somebody who is “caring, knowledgeable and has good communication skills.” Mike describes a person who is “flexible, supportive, quiet demeanor” and who can be “assertive when needed with the classroom teachers to advocate for their kids.” Ted’s response was interesting; he said he wants a person who is “understanding, organized,” and he expressed that the person currently in the role of special education teacher is not where he wants or needs her to be. His challenge corresponds to the finding of the MetLife Survey: “principals also rate the responsibilities of addressing the individual needs of diverse learners…as significant leadership challenges.” (MetLife, p.3).

The four principals interviewed presented as motivated, caring, and thoughtful. This demonstrates their “character,” “personal values, self-awareness and emotional and moral capability” (Bush and Glover, 2003, p. 5). Colleen lamented the plight of students who struggle in school when they are at the end of the special education process and are not found to have a disability, saying “nope they don’t qualify; they’ll continue to struggle and fail.” This is one of the reasons she said her school “tries to qualify” failing students as special education. It is the only intervention at her disposal.

Colleen worries about the assessments that students must take, saying that it is “a complete waste of time.” Her view is shared in the research: The results of yearly assessments
and determination of advancement that demonstrate growth and progress for all students is viewed by some principals as “unreasonable” (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers and Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006, p. 154). The recognition that thinking about what is best for students is a constant for principals was also reflected in their descriptions of memorable students. Ted talked about a student who “really struggled; he had a lot of anger, he was self-mutilating.” He questioned himself, reflecting, “I really thought… am I going to be able to handle this child?” Years later, he knows he made a difference for that student, “just because [he] listened to him.” Sam’s description of his most memorable student also demonstrates this recognition. “Fortunately I believed in him, I knew he could do it. He’s not ‘fixed,’ but he is successful and he is here and he is learning, and that’s our goal.” This theme of addressing what is best for students among the four principals interviewed demonstrated their care for 100% of the students.

Overwhelmed

Principalst interviewed expressed a sense of being overwhelmed at times. This finding is consistent with research on principals and the fact that a principal has to possess “a strong sense of purpose” because everything “that takes place” at their school is their “major responsibility” (Fullan, p. 59) (Robson, p. 378). A thought that Colleen supposed exemplifies this responsibility: “Dear God don’t let anything happen today that I can’t handle.” As Ted, the first year principal expressed, “It’s overwhelming, it’s like anything new but with this amount of responsibility, it’s magnified -- but I’m surviving. I am getting through it.” Mike reported, “You don’t know what’s coming” and Sam qualified his challenge saying, “We’ve got to do a better job, but when you have all those kids it is really hard to do it.”

The principals conveyed a sense that because every day presents different challenges, the notion of a “typical day” they were asked to describe resulted in a laundry list of what they
attempt to address daily. The recent MetLife survey supports the impression that many principals are also frazzled: “The responsibilities of school leadership have changed significantly in recent years, leading to a job that principals say has become too complex and highly stressful.” (MetLife, 2013 p.3). These “education leaders must not only manage school finances, keep buses running on time, and make hiring decisions, but they must also be instructional leaders, data analysts, community relations officers, and change agents” (ISLLC, 2008, p. 3). Today, they “play a key role in school improvement and improving student outcomes” (Waldron, McLesky and Redd, 2011, p. 51). The principals reported that they are managing, and they strive to be instructional leaders. As a result, Colleen is “exhausted,” and Ted is “struggling to keep things afloat.” Mike looked at some of his job as being “pulled all day long” and said that he was often applying the “proverbial Band-Aid” to situations. One contributing factor is that “principals generally feel personally accountable for everything that happens for children in their schools” (MetLife, 2013 p.3). Colleen’s reference to the death of a child at another local school exemplifies this anxiety:

"My fear is something will happen, and there will not be an administrator in the building and we will have to try to deal with the tragedy of that. Especially after what happened with the little boy in Gardner, the TV falling on him, that gave me nightmares, nightmares, nightmares.”

Clearly, she holds herself accountable not just for student achievement, but for the safety and well-being of every student. Other principals questioned for the MetLife survey echoed her sentiments: “half report feeling under great stress several days a week or more” (MetLife, 2013 p.3).
The testing of all students and the results of statewide assessments that are tied to school principals' job performance also resulted in stress for these principals. All of them referred to mandates that they must address, MCAS being one. Colleen’s statement that “the state cannot, can-not-- continue to put things on our plates” demonstrates the frustration of added responsibilities. As the research states, school principals “will be challenged to join together in solving the problems of practice inherent in diverse, complex, high-stakes educational environment” (Boscardin, McCarthy and Delgado, 2009, p. 68). The principals interviewed said they feel this challenge.

Being responsible for the overall atmosphere of a school, the values and beliefs that translate to students, staff, and the school community can also contribute to the feeling of being overwhelmed. As principals spoke, they described pieces that contribute to what they need to address. Mike cites the school morale, “I’m the third principal they’ve had in five years, so I’m trying to get that stability.” When asked about becoming a principal, Sam said (laughing) “Sometimes I rethink that -- every day” because he sees that the “days of the principal being a manager and not a leader [have] changed.” Colleen said that sometimes she has to just “decompress and let the anger out,” and vent about complaints from parents and teachers to her assistant principal. Morale and sustaining an environment conducive to learning weighs on principals, and they "are the key factor in building and sustaining a school culture in which both teachers and students can succeed.” (MetLife, 2013, p.23)

Another area that may affect principals' stress is their level of understanding of special education. Although all the principals interviewed were certified administrators, there was extreme variation in their ability to identify basic types of disabilities and what knowledge is required of school principals. Preparation for dealing appropriately with special education and
students with disabilities is an area of weakness, and principals are “ill-prepared” to manage all aspects of this area (Praisner, 2003, p. 142)(Lazaridou, 2009). Colleen expressed sympathy for parents, who “grieve for their child’s disability” and “cry because their child never gets invited to a birthday party.” Ted clearly stated that he is “kind of learning this on [his] own” and he does not feel as prepared because he is “just learning all of the regulations and the processes… there is so much to it.” Mike said “he is not good at the terminology” when asked about the types of disabilities at his school. Sam articulated specific types of disabilities and said that his staff addressed student needs procedurally. He also mentioned his follow-through with evaluation of teachers who service students with special needs. Sam did also say that teacher evaluation took up most of his school day.

To ensure that students receive proper instruction, “administrators must be vigilant about maintaining quality and doggedly monitor academic outcomes and classroom practices to ensure that programs designed for students with special learning needs do not become “dumping grounds” that further marginalize the students they were designed to help” (Boykin and Noguera, 2011, p. 187). To accomplish this task, principals need to have “fundamental knowledge of special education as well as knowledge of current issues in special education” (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006, p. 154). If principals are not properly prepared to face special education issues, it could contribute to their feelings of being overwhelmed on the job.

**Prescription and Future Implications**

In certification and licensure programs for principals, there needs to be a uniform approach to administrative preparation programs that includes study of special education. Principal certification in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts does not set any requirements for individuals seeking licensure that is specific to knowledge of special education law, policies and
procedures, and understanding of the types of disabilities they will encounter in the school setting. Better understanding of the experiences of principals may assist in future training of principals, possibly helping to prepare them to address the needs of all students more effectively.

Ongoing professional development for current principals would provide job-embedded opportunities for principals to learn more about special education issues and help with decision making at the school level. Specific recommendations for these opportunities would include: diagnosis of disabilities, policies and procedures for students with disabilities, evaluation training in specifically designed instructional practices for students with disabilities, using data to remediate instruction in the special education service delivery.

Principals face mandates that require action. If they do not have the basic understanding of disabilities they cannot provide the most comprehensive educational setting for all students. They manage and lead without the requisite understanding of up to 20% of their student population. When considering the needs of this population, incomplete or inadequate understanding of disabilities and special education regulations potentially jeopardizes student outcomes. Current requirements for the completion of an administrative degree at Fitchburg State University (referenced as the closest university geographically to the four principals) outlines courses on data, relationships with stakeholders, leadership, as well as the practicum. Standardization of certification avenues that include comprehensive instruction around terminology, types of disabilities, specialized instruction that is effective, and exposure to the different types of modifications and accommodations that are successful with students would benefit principals, students, and staff. Without this intervention, administrator preparation
programs potentially consign students with disabilities to further “marginalization” (Devlin and Pothier, 2005, p.1).

Limitations

This study represents the experiences of four elementary school principals in Massachusetts. This small sample does not indicate the experiences of all principals and reflect the answers provided by Mike, Ted, Colleen and Sam.

Conclusion

Principals’ continued employment is based on the success of all students. The importance of understanding how principals view special education is critical because the principal “sets the tone” and attitude in the school for all members of the school, including students, teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff, parents, and the community (Horrocks, 2008, p.1472).

The key areas of focus in this study are: principals and school leadership, special education, and the specific language associated with the area of special education. As the principals answers convey, serving as a building principal is a “major responsibility” (Robson, 1981, p.378). In gauging their perceived level of preparedness, it is clear that there are deficits in principals' knowledge of special education. Dipaola and Walther-Thomas write that with educational leadership “who clearly understand the needs of students with disabilities, IDEA, and the instructional challenges that educators who work with students with disabilities face are better prepared to provide appropriate support” (2003, p.9).

The principals’ prior teaching proficiency did not include any teaching of students with special needs. There were no personal connections to individuals with disabilities were conveyed by the principals interviewed. Special education policies and procedures as well as the types of
disabilities present in elementary schools connect to the daily environment and operations of the public elementary school and all principals require clear understanding of these essential matters. Of note in the emerging themes is the conflict between the expressed outlook of preparedness for the position and the lack of full understanding of disabilities and special education related issues. Their optimism toward the daily job reflected their desire to provide for all students and the overwhelming responsibilities they face. The lived experiences of the four principals interviewed tell a story of hopefulness that includes working well with staff and students. The future implications for current and future school administrators must include specific training regarding disabilities, best practices in specialized instruction, and ongoing job-embedded instruction to address mandates related to special education. In order to provide truly effective leaders for all members of the school community, principals must be expert in all facets of the position. They are accountable for the achievement of all students in the school.
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United States Department of Education Final Regulations and the Federal Register for 34 CFR Parts 300 and 30134 CFR §§300.205(d), 300.208(a)(2), 300.226 and 300.646(b)(2) Response to Intervention Information.


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1 DESE Certification: At a minimum, one must: have a “bachelor’s degree, Achieve a passing score on the Communication and Literacy Skills test, Demonstration of successful application of the Professional Standards for Administrators through completion of a Performance Assessment for Initial License, Completion of at least three full years of employment in an executive management/leadership role or in a supervisory, teaching, or administrative role in a public school, private school, higher education, or other educational setting accepted by the Department.” In addition, the principal certification candidate must choose one of these: “Completion of an Administrative Apprenticeship/Internship in the principal/assistant principal role at the level of the license sought with a trained mentor using Department guidelines, or Completion of an approved post-baccalaureate program of studies including a supervised practicum/practicum equivalent in the role of this license, or Completion of a Panel Review (limited to those candidates who have completed a post-baccalaureate program in management/administration at an accredited institution or have three full years of employment in an executive, management, leadership, supervisory, or administrative role)” (DESE, 603 CMR 7.15 (3)).

2 Fitchburg State University- M.Ed. in Educational Leadership and Management: School Principal (Initial Licensure)
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Appendix A

1. Standards and Indicators of Effective Administrator Leadership Practice

   CMR 35.04 Standards and Indicators of Effective Administrator Leadership Practice

   School committees shall establish evaluation systems and performance standards for the evaluation of administrators that include all of the principles of evaluation, set forth in 603 CMR 35.00-35.11. School committees may supplement the standards and indicators in 603 CMR 35.04 with additional measurable performance standards consistent with state law and collective bargaining agreements where applicable. The district shall adapt the indicators based on the role of the administrator to reflect and allow for significant differences in assignment and responsibilities. The district shall share the performance standards with all administrators.

   (1) Instructional Leadership standard: Promotes the learning and growth of all students and the success of all staff by cultivating a shared vision that makes effective teaching and learning the central focus of schooling.

   (a) Curriculum indicator: Ensures that all teachers design effective and rigorous standards-based units of instruction consisting of well-structured lessons with measurable outcomes.

   (b) Instruction indicator: Ensures that instructional practices in all settings reflect high expectations regarding content and quality of effort and work, engage all students, and are personalized to accommodate diverse learning styles, needs, interests, and levels of readiness.

   (c)
Assessment indicator: Ensures that all teachers use a variety of formal and informal methods and assessments to measure student learning, growth and understanding, and also make necessary adjustments to their practice when students are not learning.

(d)

Evaluation indicator: Provides effective and timely supervision and evaluation in alignment with state regulations and contract provisions, including:

1. Ensures educators pursue meaningful, actionable, and measurable professional practice and student learning goals.

2. Makes frequent unannounced visits to classrooms and gives targeted and constructive feedback to teachers.

3. Exercises sound judgment in assigning ratings for performance and impact on student learning.

4. Reviews alignment between judgment about practice and data about student learning, growth, or achievement when evaluating and rating educators and understands that the supervisor has the responsibility to confirm the rating in cases where a discrepancy exists.

(e)

Data-informed Decision-making indicator: Uses multiple sources of evidence related to student learning, including state, district, and school assessment results and growth data, to inform school and district goals and improve organizational performance, educator effectiveness, and student learning.
(2) Management and Operations standard: Promotes the learning and growth of all students and the success of all staff by ensuring a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment, using resources to implement appropriate curriculum, staffing, and scheduling.

(a) Environment indicator: Develops and executes effective plans, procedures, routines and operational systems to address a full range of safety, health, emotional, and social needs of students.

(b) Human Resources Management and Development indicator: Implements a cohesive approach to recruitment, hiring, induction, development, and career growth that promotes high quality and effective practice.

(c) Scheduling and Management Information Systems indicator: Uses systems to ensure optimal use of time for teaching, learning and collaboration.

(d) Laws, Ethics and Policies indicator: Understands and complies with state and federal laws and mandates, school committee policies, collective bargaining agreements, and ethical guidelines.

(e) Fiscal Systems indicator: Develops a budget that supports the district's vision, mission and goals; allocates and manages expenditures consistent with district/school level goals and available resources.
(3) Family and Community Engagement standard: Promotes the learning and growth of all
students and the success of all staff through effective partnerships with families, community
organizations, and other stakeholders that support the mission of the school and district.

(a)
Engagement indicator: Actively ensures that all families are welcome members of the classroom
and school community and can contribute to the classroom, school, and community's
effectiveness.

(b)
Sharing Responsibility indicator: Continuously collaborates with families to support student
learning and development both at home and at school.

(c)
Communication indicator: Engages in regular, two-way, culturally proficient communication
with families about student learning and performance.

(d)
Family Concerns indicator: Addresses family concerns in an equitable, effective, and efficient
manner.

(4) Professional Culture standard: Promotes success for all students by nurturing and sustaining a
school culture of reflective practice, high expectations, and continuous learning for staff.

(a)
Commitment to High Standards indicator: Fosters a shared commitment to high standards of
teaching and learning with high expectations for achievement for all, including:
1. Mission and Core Values: Develops, promotes, and secures staff commitment to core values that guide the development of a succinct, results-oriented mission statement and ongoing decision-making.

2. Meetings: Plans and leads well-run and engaging meetings that have clear purpose, focus on matters of consequence, and engage participants in a thoughtful and productive series of conversations and deliberations about important school matters.

(b)

Cultural Proficiency indicator: Ensures that policies and practices enable staff members and students to contribute to and interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment in which students' backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges are respected.

(c)

Communications indicator: Demonstrates strong interpersonal, written, and verbal communication skills

(d)

Continuous Learning indicator: Develops and nurtures a culture in which all staff members are reflective about their practice and use student data, current research, best practices and theory to continuously adapt instruction and achieve improved results. Models these behaviors in the administrator's own practice.

(e)

Shared Vision indicator: Successfully and continuously engages all stakeholders in the creation of a shared educational vision in which every student is prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and careers, and can become responsible citizens and community contributors.

(f)
Managing Conflict indicator: Employs strategies for responding to disagreement and dissent, constructively resolving conflict, and building consensus throughout a district/school community.

**Regulatory Authority:**

603 CMR 35.00: M.G.L. c.69, §1B; c.71, §38
Appendix B

Graphic Display-DESE Certification

Email Recruitment Protocol

Human Subject Research Protection

Interview Protocol
Graphic Display of Licensure Options in Massachusetts: DESE
Email Recruitment Protocol

Date of email:

Potential Interviewee:

Subject Line: Research Participant

Dear Principal,

Thank you for taking the time to read this email. My name is Tara Hanley. I am a principal at the Quabbin Regional School District and I am asking if you would be available and willing to participate in an interview as part of the completion of my dissertation at Northeastern University.

The interview would be conducted at a location of your choosing at a mutually agreed upon time and will last approximately an hour. Your identity will not be divulged in the study and your responses will be anonymous in the completed paper. I will be taping the interview in order to fully preserve your responses. My sincere hope is that my research will assist fellow principals in the future. Your participation would be appreciated, however it is entirely voluntary. If this sounds like something you would be willing to take part in, please respond by email and I will contact you to set up an interview at your convenience.

Thank you so much for your time.

Tara Hanley
Hanley.ta@husky.neu.edu
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigators: Principal Investigator, Kristal Clemons
Student Researcher, Tara Hanley
Title of Project: Principal's Experiences with Special Education

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are a principal in the state of Massachusetts who has some experience with special education.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences that elementary school principals have with special education. Understanding the day to day dealings will help to inform current principals and prepare future principals to assist students with disabilities and their families.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you participate in an interview. The interview will take an hour and will be taped.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed at a location of your choosing. The meeting will take approximately one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There are no risks, however the questions may invite you to reflect on how you view students with disabilities and the time they take while doing your job. It may also cause you to consider the factors that link job security to a tested subgroup at your school.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There is no direct benefit to participating, however you may be adding to the professional information about principals and an important component of their jobs.
Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. Only the researcher and her advisor will see your information. In the study, your information will be protected through the use of an assigned number.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

No harm will come to participants.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Principal Investigator: Kristal Clemons, Ph.D. k.clemons@neu.edu
Student Researcher: Tara Hanley hanley.ta@husky.neu.edu 978-386-5521

Who can I contact if I have questions about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of person agreeing to take part __________________________ Date __________

Printed name of person above __________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent __________________________ Date __________

Printed name of person above __________________________
Interview Protocol: Principals Experiences with Special Education

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

This interview is being conducted to learn about the perceptions, experiences, and stories that elementary school principals possess regarding students with disabilities. It is part of a research project for a doctoral dissertation. The findings will be used to inform what current principals know about special education and what future principals need to know to be prepared to take on the challenging and changing role of school administrator.

Research Questions:

1. What factors contribute to principals’ proficiencies with special education?
   
   What are the demographic contributors of the principals participating (certifications, philosophy of education, view of special education over their time as a principal, percentage of students in their school with identified disabilities, MCAS scores of subgroups)?

2. How do principals view their experiences with special education?
   
   Does the time spent on special education issues shape their experiences (time at IEP meetings, attending Student Support Teams, communication with parents, behavioral incidents, competency of special education staff)?

Interview Questions:

Describe what led you to becoming an elementary school principal.
Tell me how you see your role overseeing the school. How do you prioritize?

Can you walk me through your typical day?

How do special education services come to life in your school—what does special education look like here?

Describe the types of disabilities you deal with at your school.

What affect does statewide testing have on your special education subgroup?

What are the characteristics of your best special education teacher? How do you best support your special education staff?

Who is your most memorable student?